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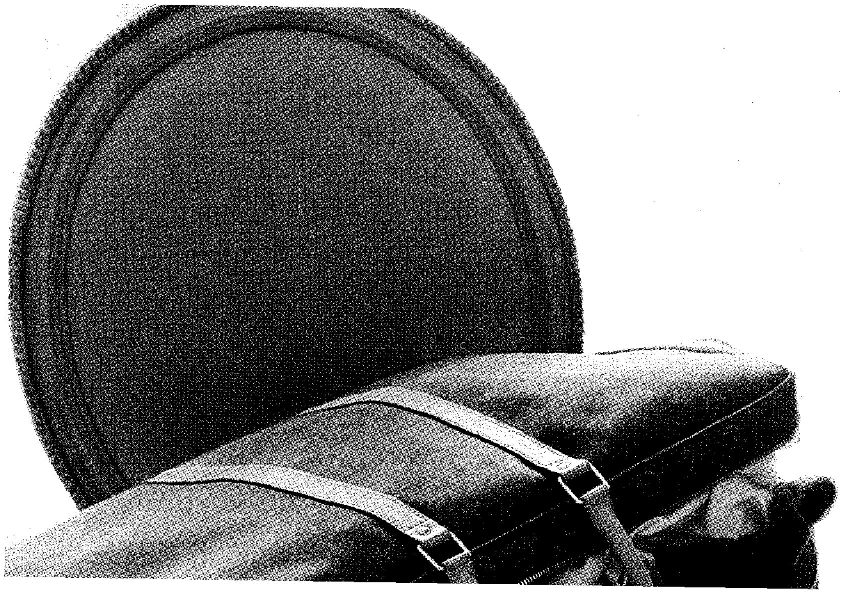

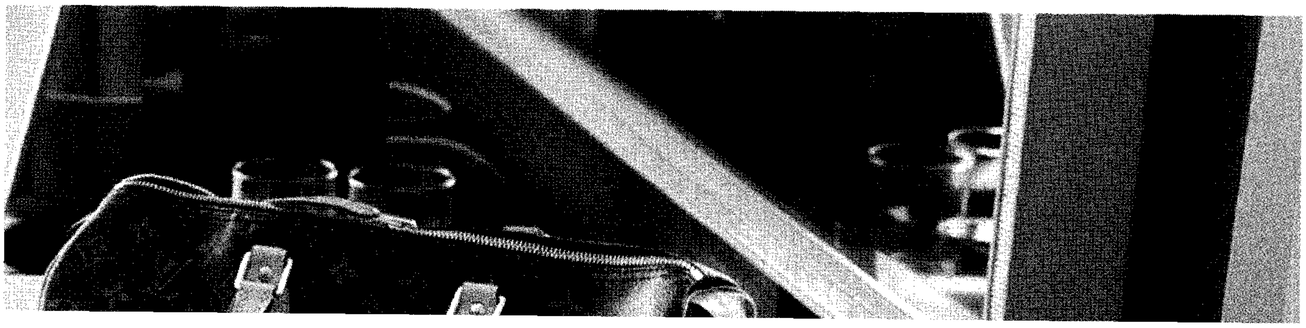

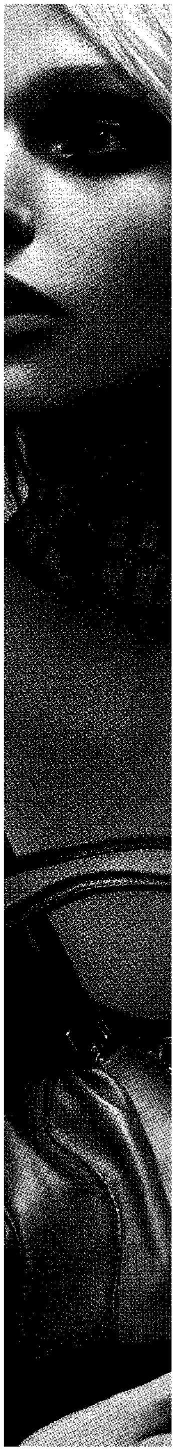

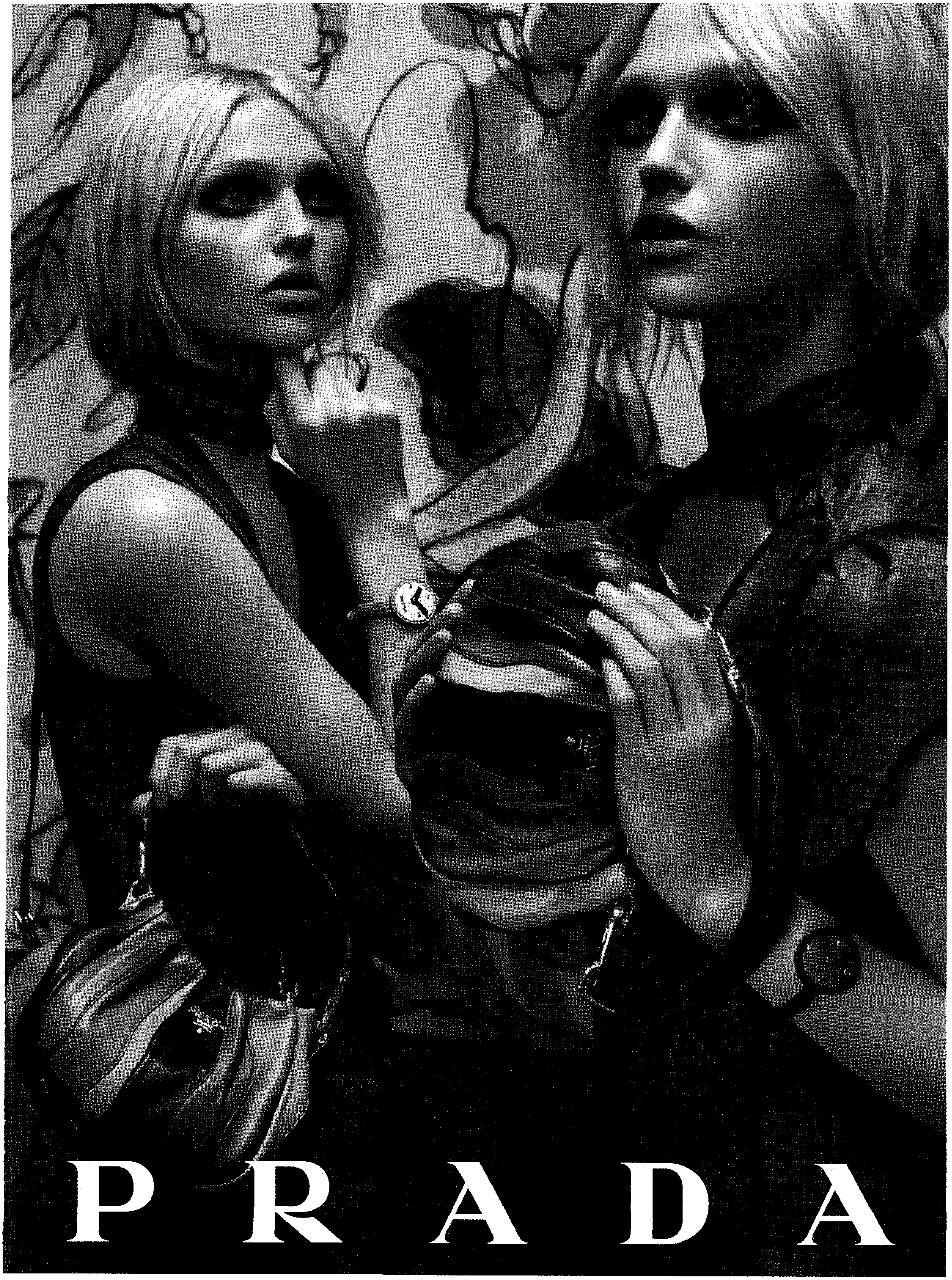
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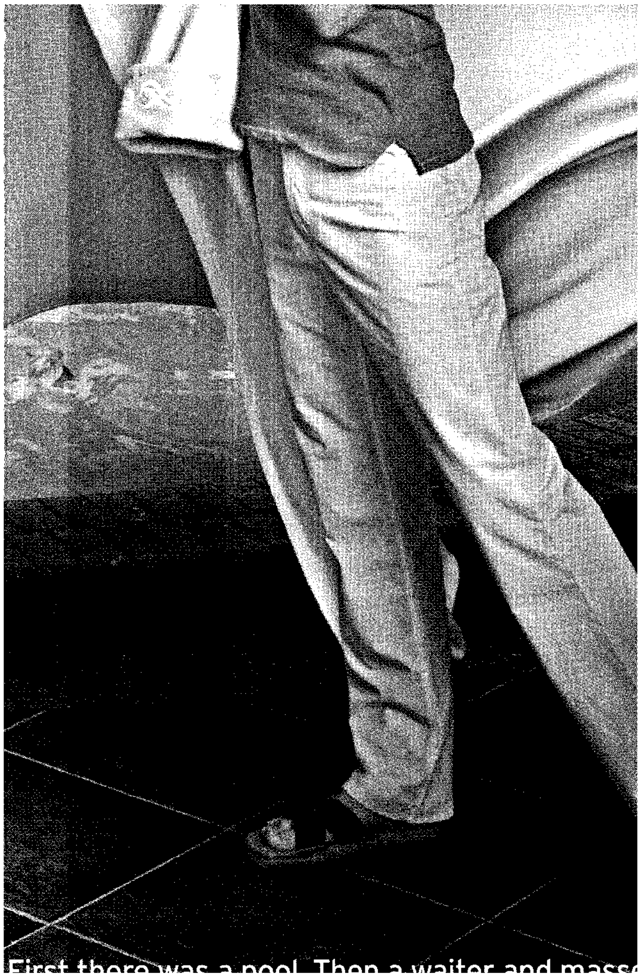

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Francesco Vezzoli is an Italian multimedia artist
work explores celebrity culture.

Fareed Zakaria is the editor of *Newsweek Intern*
the author of the upcoming book "The Post-Ame

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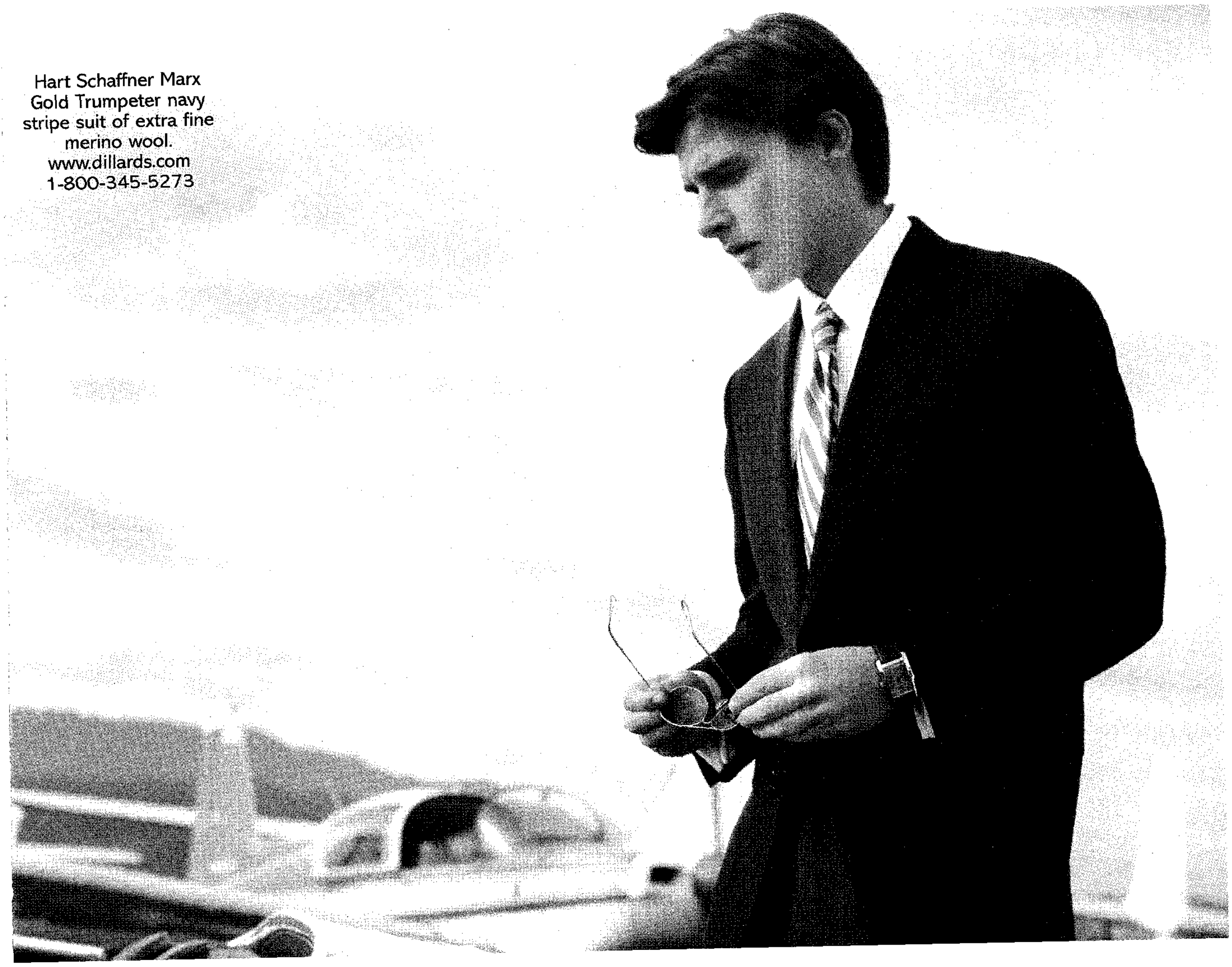
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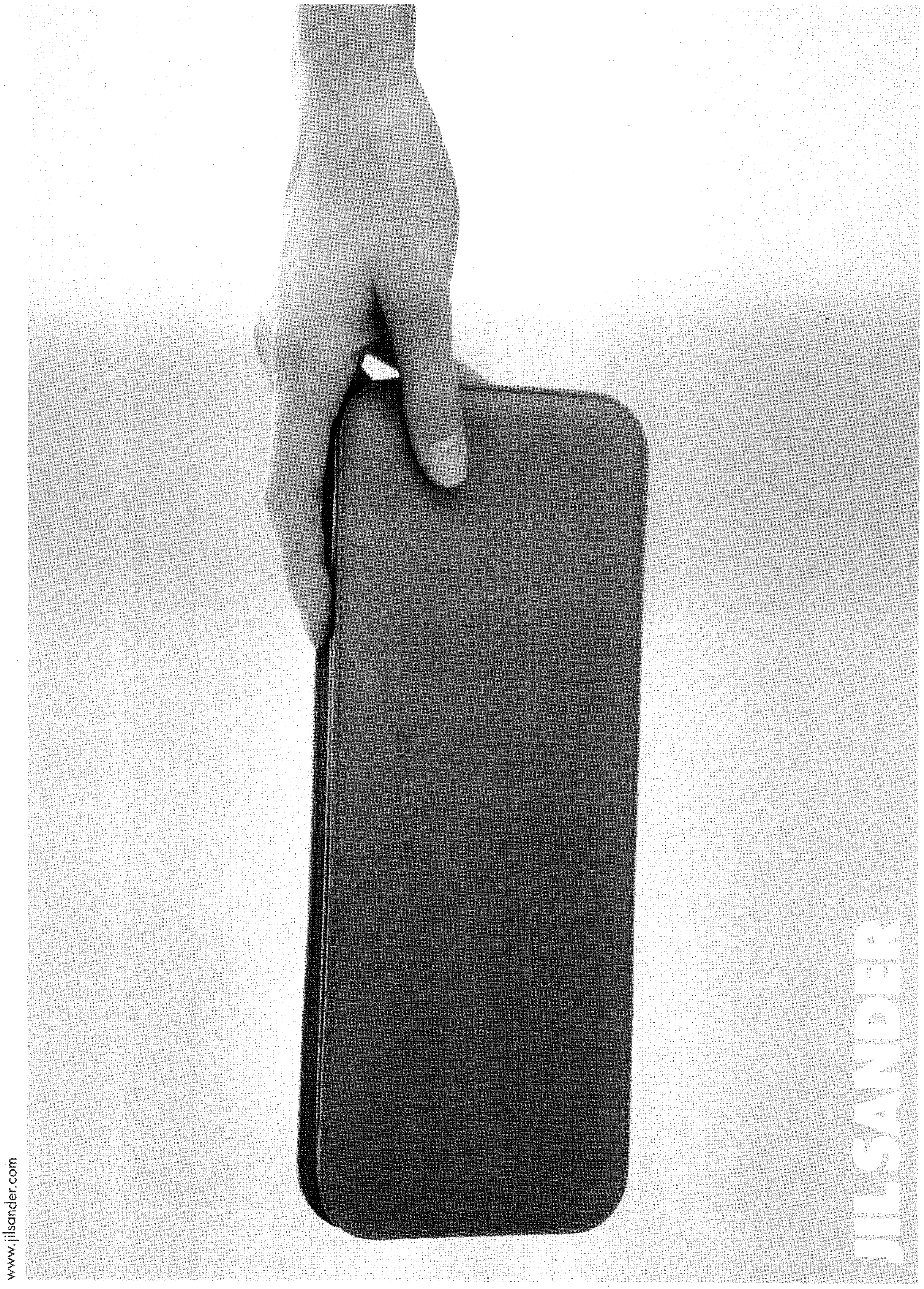
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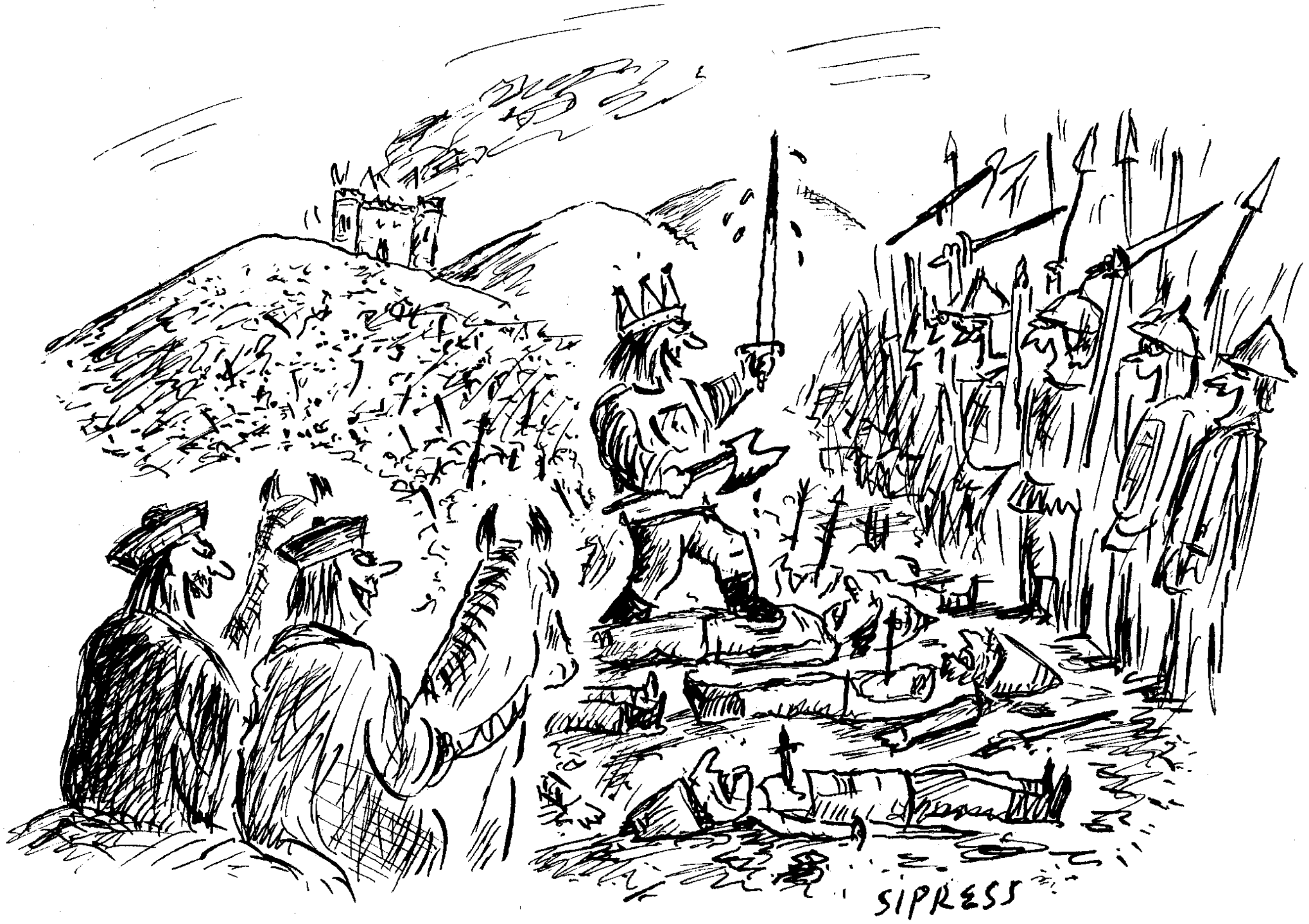

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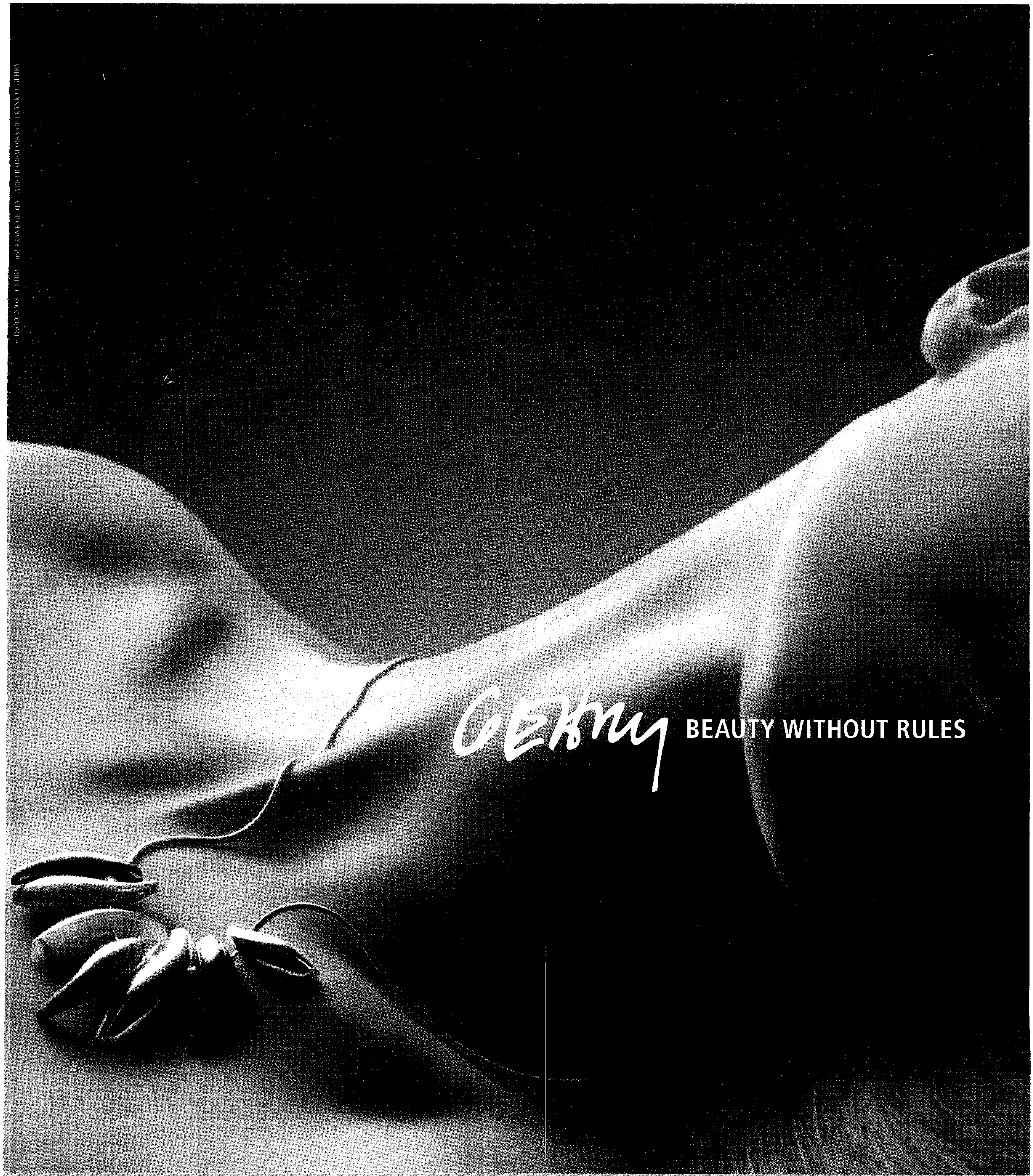
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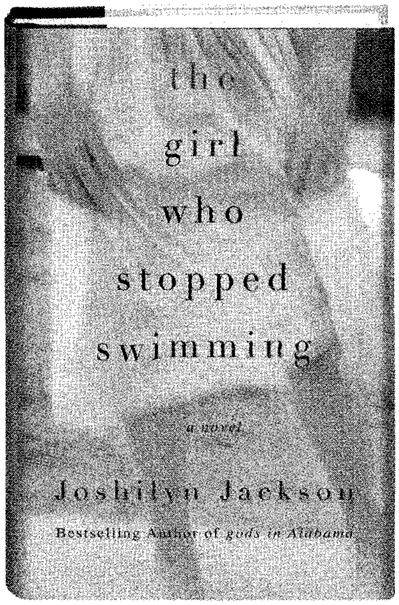
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CONTRIBUTORS

Lauren Collins ("The Other Obama," p. 88) is deputy editor of The Talk of the Town, and a staff writer.

Michael Chabon ("Secret Skin," p. 64) received a 2001 Pulitzer Prize for his novel "The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay." He will publish a collection of essays, "Maps and Legends," in May.

Judith Thurman ("Two for One," p. 70) is the author of "Cleopatra's Nose: 39 Varieties of Desire," a collection of *New Yorker* essays.

Ian Frazier (Shouts & Murmurs, p. 80) will publish "Lamentations of the Father: Essays" in April.

Lizzie Widdicombe (The Talk of the Town, p. 58) is a member of the magazine's editorial staff.

Patricia Marx ("Tech Stuff," p. 82) writes for film and television. Her novel "Him Her Him Again The End of Him" is available in paperback.

Dan Chiasson (Poem, p. 94) is a poet and literary critic who teaches at Wellesley College. A collection of his essays, "One Kind of Everything: Poem and Person in Contemporary America," was published last year.

John Colapinto ("Elegant Monsters," p. 98), a staff writer, is the author of two books, "As Nature Made Him" and "About the Author," a novel.

Stephen Dunn (Poem, p. 104) has written fourteen books of poetry, including "Different Hours," which was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 2001.

Hari Kunzru (Fiction, p. 108) published his third novel, "My Revolutions," in January.

Janet Malcolm (A Critic at Large, p. 116) is a staff writer. Her books include "Reading Chekhov" and "Two Lives: Gertrude and Alice."

James Surowiecki (The Financial Page, p. 62) writes a regular business column for the magazine. His book "The Wisdom of Crowds" is out in paperback.

John Lanchester (Books, p. 120) is the author of four books, including "The Debt to Pleasure," a novel, which won a Julia Child award. "Family Romance," a memoir, was published last year.

Richard McGuire (Spots) contributed to a collaborative film project, "Fear(s) of the Dark," showing at the Rendez-Vous with French Cinema festival, at Lincoln Center, in New York.

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Audio: *Michael Chabon* talks about superheroes and their capes. / *Jonathan Lethem* reads James Thurber's story "The Wood Duck." / *Ryan Lizza* and *Hendrik Hertzberg* discuss the Presidential race. / The Naked Campaign: videos featuring *Steve Brodner* drawing the candidates. / *Barbara Smaller* takes over as Cartoonist of the Month. / A culture blog by the editors of Goings On About Town. / From the archives: *David Remnick* on Garry Kasparov, *Larissa MacFarquhar* on Barack Obama, and thousands of book and movie reviews. / Animated cartoons and the caption contest.

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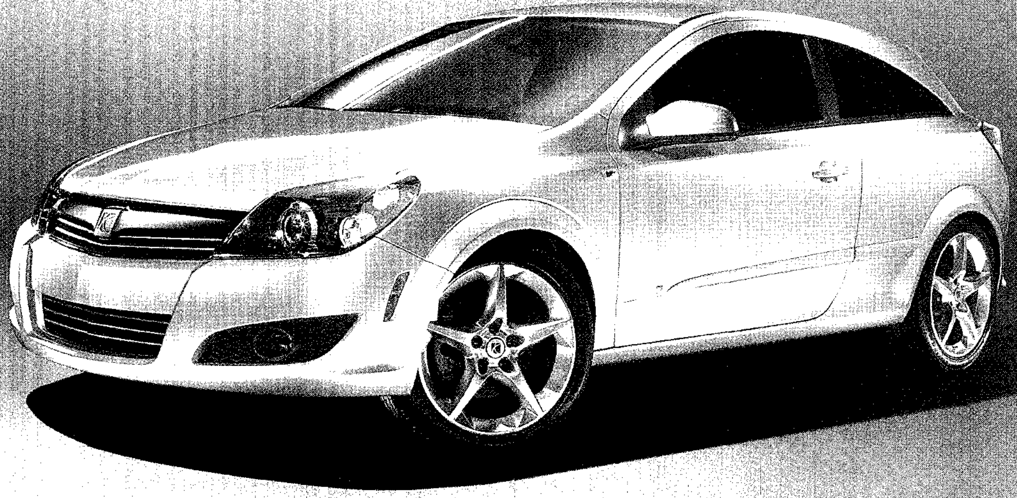

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POLITICS AND RACE

Peter J. Boyer observes that Newark's mayor, Cory Booker, and Senator Barack Obama are "breakthrough figures—African-American politicians whose appeal transcends race" ("The Color of Politics," February 4th). Unfortunately, this idea of transcending race seems to me essentially wishful thinking. Race is as powerful a force in the sinew of this society as gravity is in the physical world. It is interesting that when the idea of transcending race is put forth it always references African-Americans—making it an imprecise way of suggesting that in spite of the sad history of racism in this country some African-Americans are able, in rare situations, to mute the negative connotations that the larger society associates with blackness. In several campaigns in recent memory, racial reasoning has been impervious to transcendence: in 1988, when George H. W. Bush supporters used the visage of Willie Horton as a scare tactic; in 2000, when John McCain was smeared by implications about the parentage of his (adopted) child; and, to a lesser extent, in this year's primary campaign, in President Clinton's attacks on Obama. There are, however, occasions when significant elements of the negative power of the racial dynamic are checked, and even though we still see racial differences, we do not confuse difference with deficiency. This is the effect of African-American politicians like Mayor Booker and Senator Obama on the American political landscape.

William Gipson
Philadelphia, Pa.

OF CONQUERORS

Joan Acocella, in reviewing David Levering Lewis's "God's Crucible," writes that Lewis regrets that the Muslim invasion—which he regards as having done Europe a "favor"—did not extend to the continent in its entirety (Books, February 4th). Yet, as Jared Diamond argued in "Guns, Germs and Steel," while having one ruler can allow a greater spread of technology in the absence of geographic barriers, a monolithic rule can also hamper innovation. The European states emerged as competing centers of innovation; if one state did not pursue one type of innovation, then others would, forcing neighboring states to do likewise or otherwise risk being "conquered or left economically behind," a development that might have been prevented by the full conquest of Europe by Muslim invaders. The military and economic advantages that resulted from competition played a role in the creation of the great European states, which, for a time, themselves conquered a great portion of the known world.

Jack Stutman
Orlando, Fla.

THE MORTGAGE CRISIS

John Cassidy's criticism of Alan Greenspan for keeping interest rates low during the period preceding the mortgage crash seems misplaced (The Talk of the Town, February 4th). The primary job of the Federal Reserve is to pour money, effectively via interest rates, into the growing economy; to "feed" the economy so that it can grow, but at a rate that does not lead to inflation. Greenspan achieved that. It is not the job of the Fed to micromanage the market—that's the job of state and federal regulatory agencies. If there is someone to blame in this crisis, it is four groups of people: the C.E.O.s of mortgage lenders that engaged in predatory practices, the corporations that bought the resulting bonds without researching them properly, the government regulatory agencies asleep at the wheel, and the people who signed up for those mortgages without skeptical analysis of what they could truly afford.

Peter Miller
Glendale, Calif.

Cassidy notes that average house prices are falling nationwide at an annual rate of more than ten per cent and that this means that American households are

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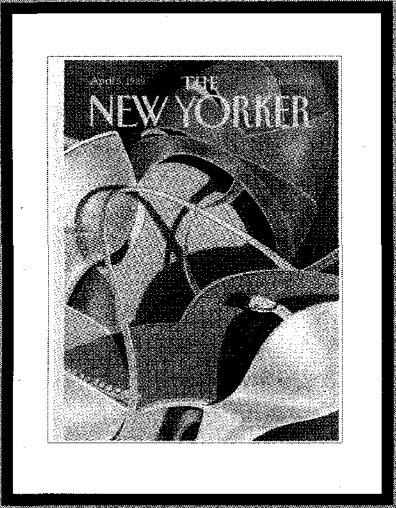
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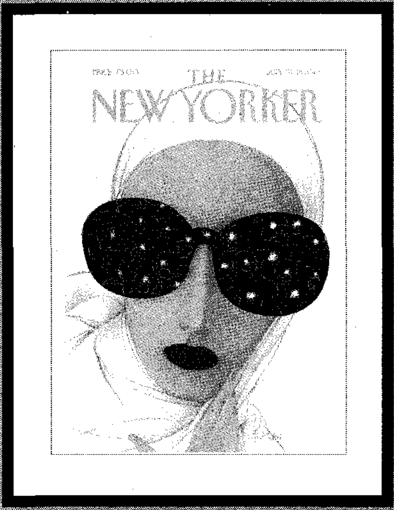
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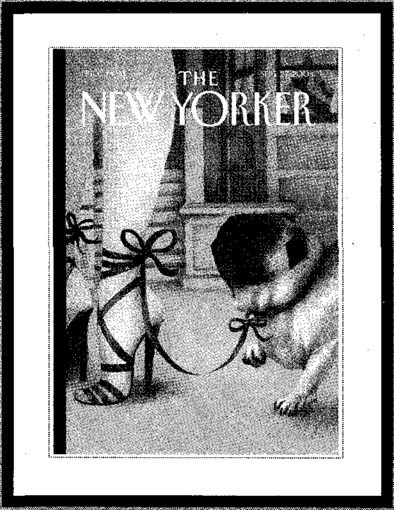
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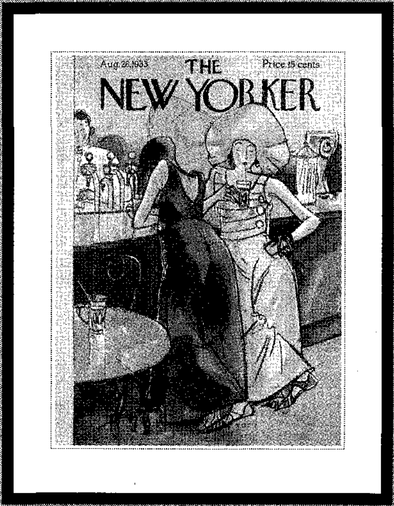
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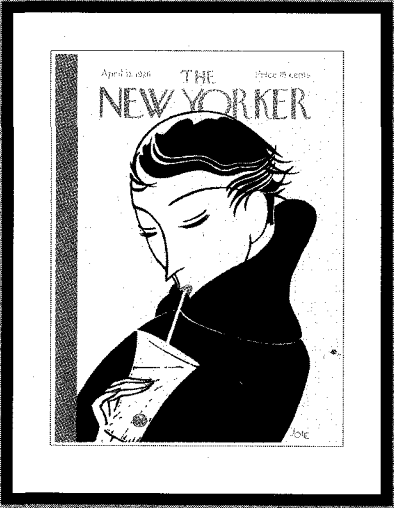
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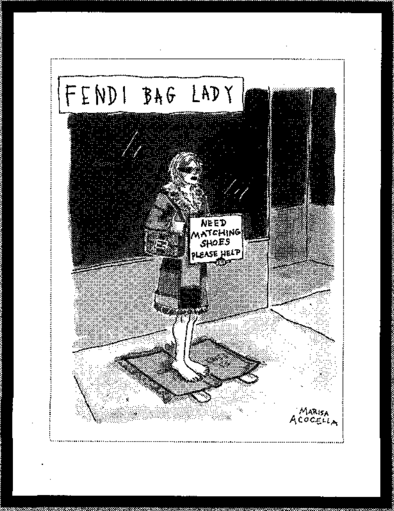
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getting poorer at a rate of more than two trillion dollars a year. The loss in total asset value of houses is not the end of the story. Of course, the real economic impacts of the bursting of the real-estate bubble—the impacts on owners and underwriters of mortgage-backed securities, the impacts on the construction and real-estate industries, and, of course, the impacts on those who actually lose their homes—cannot be ignored. But it should also be recognized that the loss in asset value to sellers is neatly balanced by a gain in buying power for buyers, and that, for homeowners who are not interested in selling (most of us), the fall in asset value could limit the availability of additional home-equity loans but could also be expected eventually to result in lower property taxes.

Robert W. Raynsford
Chief Economist, Department of the Army (retired)
Washington, D.C.

FEELING OUR WAY

Elizabeth Kolbert is right to find humor in the discipline of economics in its neoclassical and behavioral branches (Books, February 25th). She says, "What we most value in other people, after all, has little to do with the values of economics." I'd go even further, and say that calling our behavior "irrational" is an understatement, even an inversion. Economics has it exactly backward. People's behavior is governed by feelings. No one would even bother to buy a house or a candy bar unless he wanted to. And one important measure of a successful purchase is how you feel about it, damn the numbers.

Pelle Cass
Brookline, Mass.

WATER AND WAR

Paul Kramer's article on the history of the water cure is timely and important, and sadly shows how little thinking at the highest levels of government has changed in the past hundred years ("The Water Cure," February 25th). As a career Army lawyer and the first chief prosecutor for the Defense Department's Office of Military Commissions, I am intimately familiar with the gathering of evidence through the use of coercive interrogation techniques, and I find it truly pathetic that we are having a dialogue at the highest levels of government about the propriety of a related technique: waterboarding. Make no mistake about it: the water cure and waterboarding are unquestionably illegal and absolutely immoral, and those who defend their use are disgraceful. However, we can be extremely proud of Army lawyers like Judge Advocate General George B. Davis, whose principled stand against the water cure is detailed in Kramer's article. Davis's indignation about the water cure—and presumably about all those who defended it as acceptable—is no different from the indignation expressed to me about waterboarding by many uniformed lawyers currently serving in the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard.

Fred L. Borch
Colonel, U.S. Army (retired)
Charlottesville, Va.

Kramer's examination of American atrocities during the insurrection in the Philippines contains not only the rather obvious parallels to today's excesses in the war on terror, including waterboarding, but also parallels to our domestic atmosphere. It seems a fatal flaw that moralists and anyone else who truly cares about America's stated values seem perennially powerless to stop such crimes in progress, let alone bring any of the perpetrators to any meaningful sense of justice. Then, as today, there appears to be a tendency to consider those who question the government as less than patriotic and, at the very least, as encouraging the enemy and putting our troops in harm's way. Americans must stand up to our leaders when foreign adventures that impede freedom and democracy are draped in patriotism and liberty, rather than being sidelined by this manufactured hysteria.

Paul Tominac
San Francisco, Calif.

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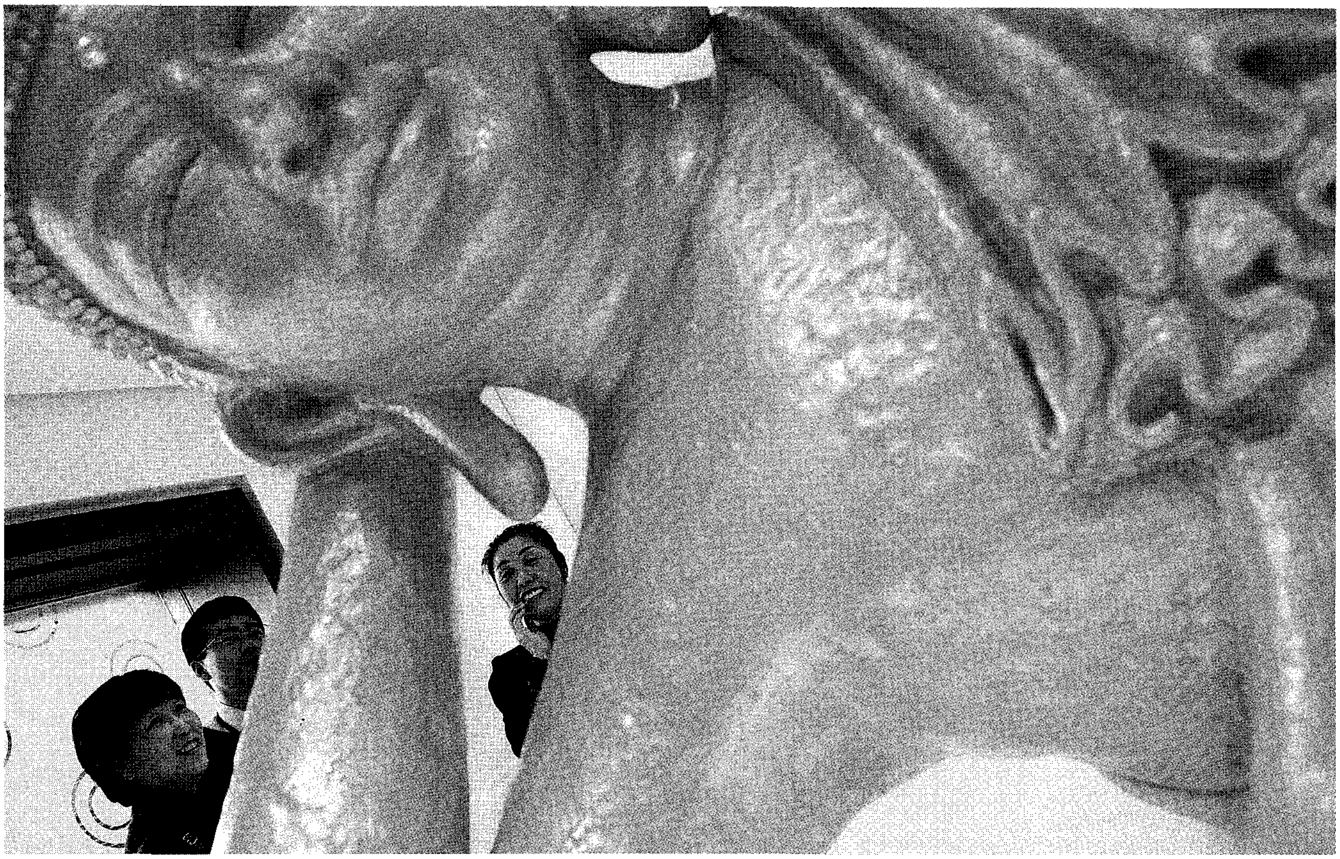

"The Vision and Art of Shinjo Ito," at Milk gallery. Photograph by Landon Nordeman.

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

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THIS WEEK

THE THEATRE
BALI HA'I IS CALLING

When Rodgers and Hammerstein's "South Pacific" opened on Broadway, in 1949, it swept the Tony Awards and earned the Pulitzer Prize. Now Bartlett Sher directs the first Broadway revival since it opened, starring Kelli O'Hara and Paulo Szot. (See page 26.)

NIGHT LIFE
DOUBLE TROUBLE

Quintron and Miss Pussycat, a New Orleans duo who employ an organ, a homemade drum machine, and puppets, combine funky grooves with an eccentric stage show. They have a pair of shows at the Bowery Ballroom and the Music Hall of Williamsburg; their current touring partners are the Black Lips, a rough-around-the-edges, neo-psychedelic garage act from Atlanta. (See pages 32 and 34.)

ART
BI FOCAL

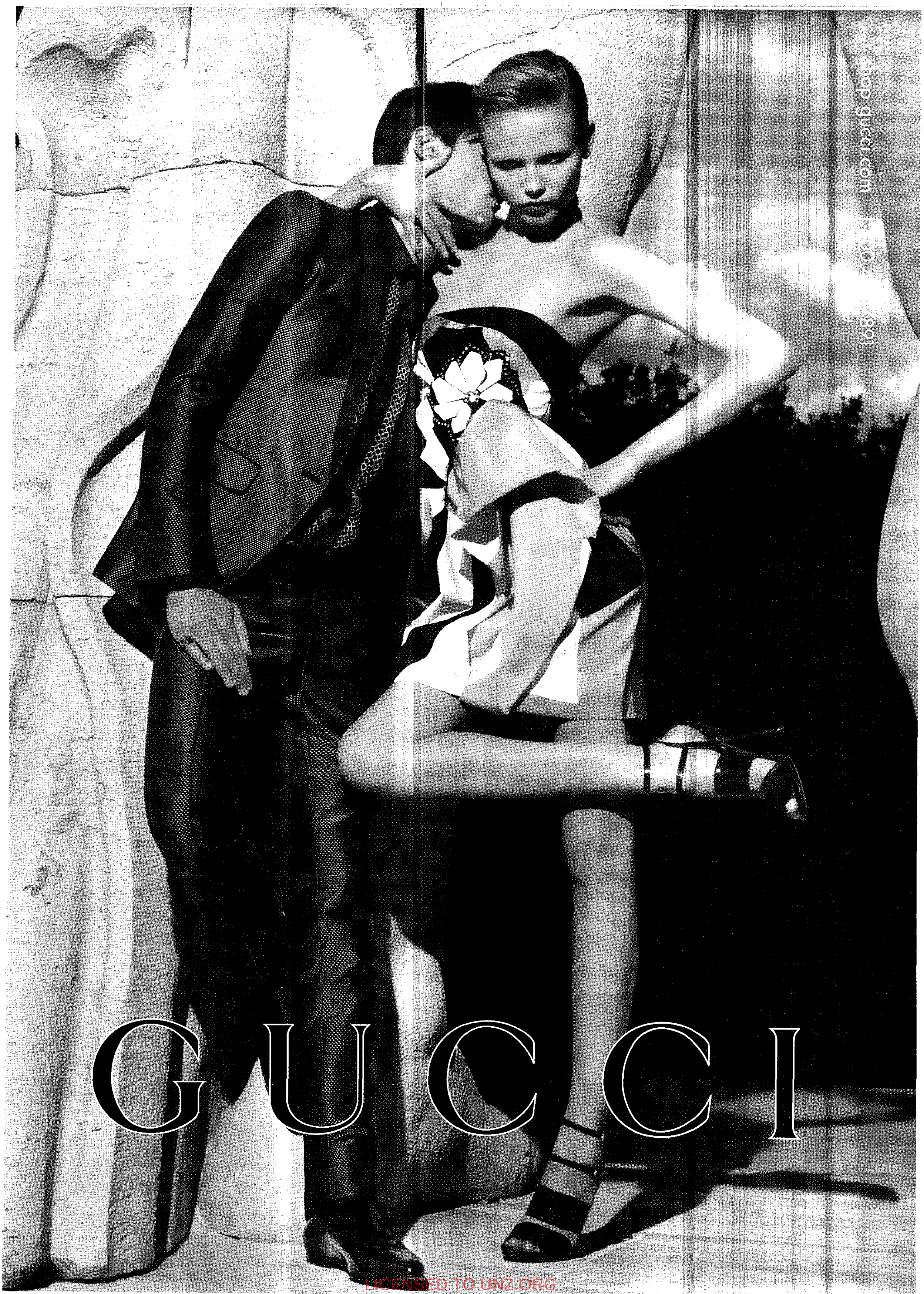
In 1932, the Whitney Museum began surveying the state of American art in its now famous biannual exhibitions. The seventy-fourth Whitney Biennial ranges across mediums, from painting and photography to sculpture to performance and video art, and includes works by more than eighty artists, from septuagenarians like John Baldessari and Robert Bechtle to up-and-comers such as New Humans and Lucky Dragons. (See page 36.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE

The New York Festival of Song reinvented the song recital during the nineteen-nineties with daring and dramatic programs. It gets back into the new-music game by offering the world premières of "Bastianello" and "Lucrezia," chamber operas by John Musto and William Bolcom (with librettos by Mark Campbell). (See page 42.)

MOVIES
BEYOND CRITICISM

In his three decades as a film critic at the *Village Voice*, J. Hoberman has done much to define downtown taste and to highlight local movies. BAM kicks off four weeks of his picks and presentations. (See page 49.)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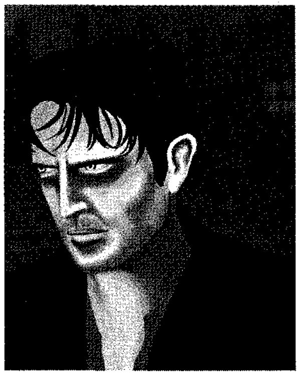
CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
LOWER EAST END

The British director Robert Hamer is best known for his black comedy, "Kind Hearts and Coronets," but two years earlier, in 1947, he made "It Always Rains on Sunday," a fascinating noirish look at life in London's East End. The movie, at Film Forum March 7-13, has a mixed background of Jewish and non-Jewish petty criminals, gamblers, and adulterers. "I know all about you and your little shiksas," a harassed wife says in a startling London accent. On the edge of the marketplaces and arcades lives a lower-middle-class family in which Rose Sandigate (Googie Withers) has taken refuge after a stormy love affair with Tommy Swann (John McCallum), a local gangster. When Swann escapes from prison and shows up, she has to face the possible destruction of the life she's made for herself. The scenes between Withers and McCallum (who later married) are stunningly erotic, and the movie ends with a spectacular chase through the London streets and rail yards. It was shot by Douglas Slocombe, whose use of lighting deep within the frame may prefigure Robert Krasker's work in "The Third Man."

—*David Denby*



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Edward Albee directs his one-act plays, from 1959 and 1960. George Bartenieff, Judith Ivey, and Myra Carter star. Previews begin March 11. (Cherry Lane, 38 Commerce St. 212-239-6200.)

BEEBO BRINKER CHRONICLES
A drama about a lesbian love triangle in pre-Stonewall Greenwich Village, adapted by Kate Moira Ryan and Linda S. Chapman from Ann Bannon's pulp novels of the fifties and sixties. Leigh Silverman ("Well") directs. Opens March 5. (37 Arts, 450 W. 37th St. 212-307-4100.)

BOOM
Alex Timbers directs Peter Sinn Nachtrieb's dark comedy, about a girl who answers the personal ad of a reclusive amateur scientist. In previews. (Ars Nova, 511 W. 54th St. 212-868-4444.)

THE BREAK-UP AND THE HAPPY SAD
Two one-act plays by Tommy Smith and Ken Urban, about New Yorkers looking for happiness. Sherri Kronfeld directs. Previews begin March 6. (Flea, 41 White St. 212-352-3101.)

CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF
Debbie Allen directs the Tennessee Williams play. Terrence Howard, Anika Noni Rose, James Earl Jones, Phylicia Rashad, and Giancarlo Esposito star. In previews. Opens March 6. (Broadhurst, 235 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.)

THE CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR
Keen Company presents the world première of a drama by Michael Roland Murphy, about Martin Luther King, Jr. In previews. (Clurman, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

CONVERSATIONS IN TUSCULUM
The Public presents a new drama about Julius Caesar, written and directed by Richard Nelson. Aidan Quinn, Brian Dennehy, and David Strathairn star. In previews. Opens March 11. (425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555.)

DRUNK ENOUGH TO SAY I LOVE YOU?
Scott Cohen and Samuel West star in Caryl Churchill's new play, about sexual politics. James Macdonald directs. In previews. (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555.)

THE FIFTH COLUMN
The Mint presents the world première of this play by Ernest Hemingway, written in 1937, about a spy in Madrid during the Spanish Civil War. Jonathan Bank directs. In previews. (311 W. 43rd St. 212-315-0231.)

THE FOUR OF US
Itamar Moses wrote this drama, about best friends who have varying success as writers. Gideon Banner and Michael Esper star; Pam MacKinnon directs. Previews begin March 6. (City Center, Stage II, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

GHOSTS
At the Pearl, Regge Life directs Henrik Ibsen's play from 1881, in which a woman tries to hide her family's ignominious past from her son. In previews. Opens March 9. (80 St. Marks Pl. 212-598-9802.)

GYPSY
Patti LuPone, Boyd Gaines, and Laura Benanti star in the musical, in a production that originated at New York City Center's "Encores!" series. Arthur Laurents directs. In previews. (St. James, 246 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.)

HELLO FAILURE
Kristen Kosmas wrote this play, about a group of submariners' wives. In previews. Opens March 6. (P.S. 122, at 150 First Ave., at 9th St. 212-352-3101.)

IN THE HEIGHTS
The Off Broadway musical, which depicts a microcosm of the Latino community of Washington Heights, moves to Broadway. With music and lyrics by Lin-Manuel Miranda and a book by Quiara Alegria Hudes. Thomas Kail directs. In previews. Opens March 9. (Richard Rodgers, 226 W. 46th St. 212-239-6200.)

PARLOUR SONG
Emily Mortimer, Chris Bauer, and Jonathan Cake star in the world première of Jez Butterworth's drama, about a man who becomes paranoid that his wife is stealing from him. Neil Pepe directs the Atlantic Theatre Company production. Opens March 5. (336 W. 20th St. 212-279-4200.)

THE POOR ITCH
The "Public Lab" series continues, with this drama by the late John Belluso, about a soldier who has returned home from Iraq without the use of his legs. Lisa Peterson directs. Previews begin March 7. (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555.)

RAPUNZEL
Kneehigh Theatre, from Cornwall, England, brings a feisty, dreadlocked Rapunzel to the New Victory. Written by Annie Siddons; Emma Rice directs. Opens March 7. (209 W. 42nd St. 646-223-3010.)

ROMEO AND JULIET
Theatre Breaking Through Barriers (formerly known as Theatre by the Blind) transposes the romance to the Upper East Side, performed by a four-person cast. In previews. (Kirk, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

THE SCARIEST
A collection of new plays based on horror stories by Nathaniel Hawthorne, W. W. Jacobs, Hans Christian Andersen, and the Book of Revelations. Ari Edelson and Meredith McDonough direct. In previews. Opens March 6. (The Theatres at 45 Bleecker, 45 Bleecker St. 212-239-6200.)

THE SEAGULL
Dianne Wiest and Alan Cumming star in the Chekhov play, translated by Paul Schmidt. Viacheslav Dolgachev directs. In previews. (Classic Stage Company, 136 E. 13th St. 212-352-3101.)

SECRETS OF A SOCCER MOM
Judith Ivey directs Kathleen Clark's new drama, about three women who compete in a soccer match with their sons. Opens March 5. (Snapple Theatre Center, 50th St. at Broadway. 212-307-4100.)

SOUTH PACIFIC
Bartlett Sher directs the first Broadway revival of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical since it opened, in 1949. Starring Kelli O'Hara and Paulo Szot. In previews. (Vivian Beaumont, Lincoln Center. 212-239-6200.)

27 RUE DE FLEURUS
Urban Stages presents a new musical comedy by Ted Sod, with music and lyrics by Lisa Koch, which imagines Alice B. Toklas's side of the story of her relationship with Gertrude Stein. In previews. Opens March 6. (Urban Stages, 259 W. 30th St. 212-868-4444.)

NOW PLAYING

ADDING MACHINE
An adaptation of Elmer Rice's 1923 Expressionist play, with a score by Joshua Schmidt and a libretto by Schmidt and Jason Loewith, about an exemplary employee who is replaced with a mechanical device. David Cromer directs. (Minetta Lane Theatre, 18 Minetta Lane. 212-307-4100.)

ARTFUCKERS
A chic disaster. As Michael Domitrovich's script gratingly tells us, it's tough to be a young, gorgeous, well-connected, artistically gifted, party-hopping, name-dropping Manhattan scion. But it's a lot tougher to be on the other side of the divide, having to sit through this glib, amorphous satire, which is at best equal to its characters in posturing self-satisfaction. The muddled direction, by Eduardo Machado, and flat performances (Will Janowitz, who played Meadow's fiancé on "The Sopranos," plays a depressed sculptor) do Domitrovich no favors. Less apparent than any shred of dramaturgical competence is the production's strained attempt to be the new downtown It play. (DR2, 103 E. 15th St. 212-239-6200.)

BETRAYED
George Packer's play, based on a 2007 article that he wrote for this magazine, provides an intimate view into the lives of Iraqi interpreters who worked with the U.S. government in Baghdad and then

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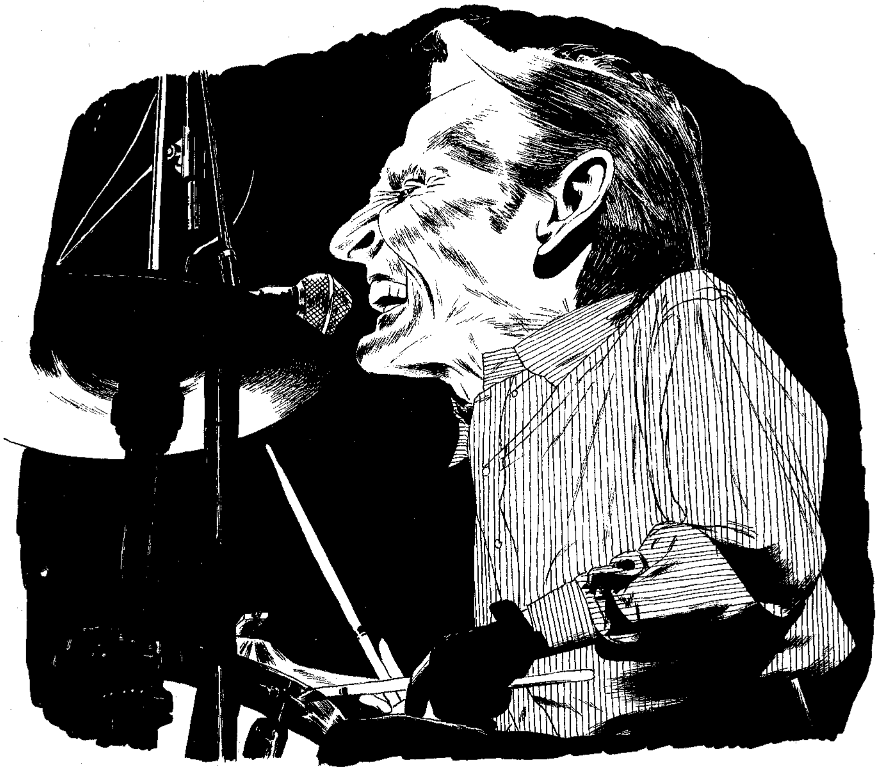
found themselves unprotected when sectarian violence threatened their safety. Adnan (Waleed F. Zuaiter) and Laith (Sevan Greene) meet at the Palestine Hotel to strategize about how best to proceed; as they wait, anxiously, for a phone call from a friend at the State Department, they remember key moments from the 2003 invasion of Baghdad to the present, which are acted out in flashbacks. Though the dialogue can be exposition-heavy, Packer's strength as a reporter makes up for his inexperience as a playwright—the writing is rich with humor and pathos, brought to life by the very talented actors under the skillful direction of Pippin Parker. (Culture Project, 55 Mercer St. 212-352-3101.)

CELEBRITY AUTOBIOGRAPHY: IN THEIR OWN WORDS
A rotating cast, including Matthew Broderick, Kristen Johnston, and Rachel Dratch, reads the works of famous people such as Britney Spears, Elizabeth Taylor, Kenny Loggins, and Burt Reynolds. Mondays only. (Triad, 158 W. 72nd St. 212-868-4444.)



The drummer and vocalist Levon Helm brings his band to the Beacon Theatre.

ANDY FRIEDMAN

COME BACK, LITTLE SHEBA
In William Inge's 1950 drama, the sound of the seismic plates of feeling and manipulation shifting beneath the drama's flat surface is shattering—if you listen. Lola (the remarkable S. Epatha Merkerson), a former beauty queen and current negligent housewife, is desperate to be noticed, especially by her alcoholic husband, Doc (the solid Kevin Anderson). While Lola thinks that everything she does is fresh and spontaneous, we can easily see the redundancy in her behavior, from spying on her boarder, Marie (Zoe Kazan), to calling for her long-lost dog, Sheba, who "just vanished one day." Aside from the strident Kazan, who plays the rotten ingénue a bit too conspicuously, the show's director, Michael Pressman, has assembled a dream ensemble; his choice of Merkerson is a wonderful bit of color-blind casting. (Reviewed in our issue of 2/4/08.) (Biltmore, 261 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

CRIMES OF THE HEART
In Beth Henley's 1981 Pulitzer Prize-winning play, set in Mississippi in 1974, the youngest of the three Magrath sisters, Babe (Lily Rabe), who shot her loutish husband in the stomach, has been released on bail. Lenny (Jennifer Dundas), the oldest, has sent a frantic telegram to their middle sister, Meg (Sarah Paulson), in Los Angeles, pleading with her to come home. Kathleen Turner's direction manages to bring out some of the play's subtler beats and moments, and it's a testament to the veteran actress's skill as a director that the greatest pleasure to be had here is in her casting. The performers so relish their parts that they make you happy about acting as an art. (2/25/08) (Laura Pels, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300.)

DEAD MAN'S CELL PHONE
The New York première of Sarah Ruhl's play, about a woman who answers the cell phone of a dead man and becomes involved with his family. Starring Mary-Louise Parker, Kathleen Chalfant, and Bill Camp. Anne Bogart directs. (Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

FABULOUS DIVAS OF BROADWAY
Halfway through this revue dedicated to Broadway's historic leading ladies both new (Christine Ebersole) and old (Ethel Merman), Alan Palmer claims that his intent is not to impersonate these famous women but to "impress" upon the audience what they have meant to him. Unfortunately, the impression one gets is that, to him, these women didn't amount to more than a few cheap laughs and an excuse to wear a bunch of silly dresses. Relying too heavily on dry, overly rehearsed shtick sprinkled amid the classic show tunes—meant to cover up the many clumsy costume changes—Palmer never seems to transcend the world of gimmick. One gets the feeling that the show would be much better were he to simply sing. (St. Luke's, 308 W. 46th St. 212-239-6200.)

GRAY AREA
John Ahlin wrote this comedy, about a media critic who goes to battle with a group of Civil War reënactors. Seth Barrish directs. (Barrow Group Arts Center, 312 W. 36th St. 212-868-4444.)

JAMAICA, FAREWELL
Debra Ehrhardt stars in an autobiographical play about leaving her home country. Wallace Norman directs. (SoHo Playhouse, 15 Vandam St. 212-691-1555.)

LIBERTY CITY
Jessica Blank and April Yvette Thompson wrote this play, about Thompson's life as the daughter of a Bahamian-Cuban father and an African-American mother in Miami. Thompson plays herself; Blank directs. (New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. 4th St. 212-239-6200.)

LIFE IN A MARITAL INSTITUTION
James Braly's wry hour-long monologue interweaves the story of his twenty-year marriage—a union rife with "tantric conflict"—with scenes from a hospice, where his sister is preparing to marry her ne'er-do-well boyfriend before she dies. The juxtaposition reveals a lifetime of relationship mayhem, and Braly presents it winningly, with a keen sense of the absurdity of everyone's eccentricities. Yet while Braly is free with embarrassing details he's less comfortable with introspection; he's happy to share his horror about his wife's freezing their son's placenta and her breast-feeding their four- and six-year-old boys, but how he ended up in such a situation remains mysterious to the audience, and, perhaps, to Braly himself. Directed by Hal Brooks. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.)

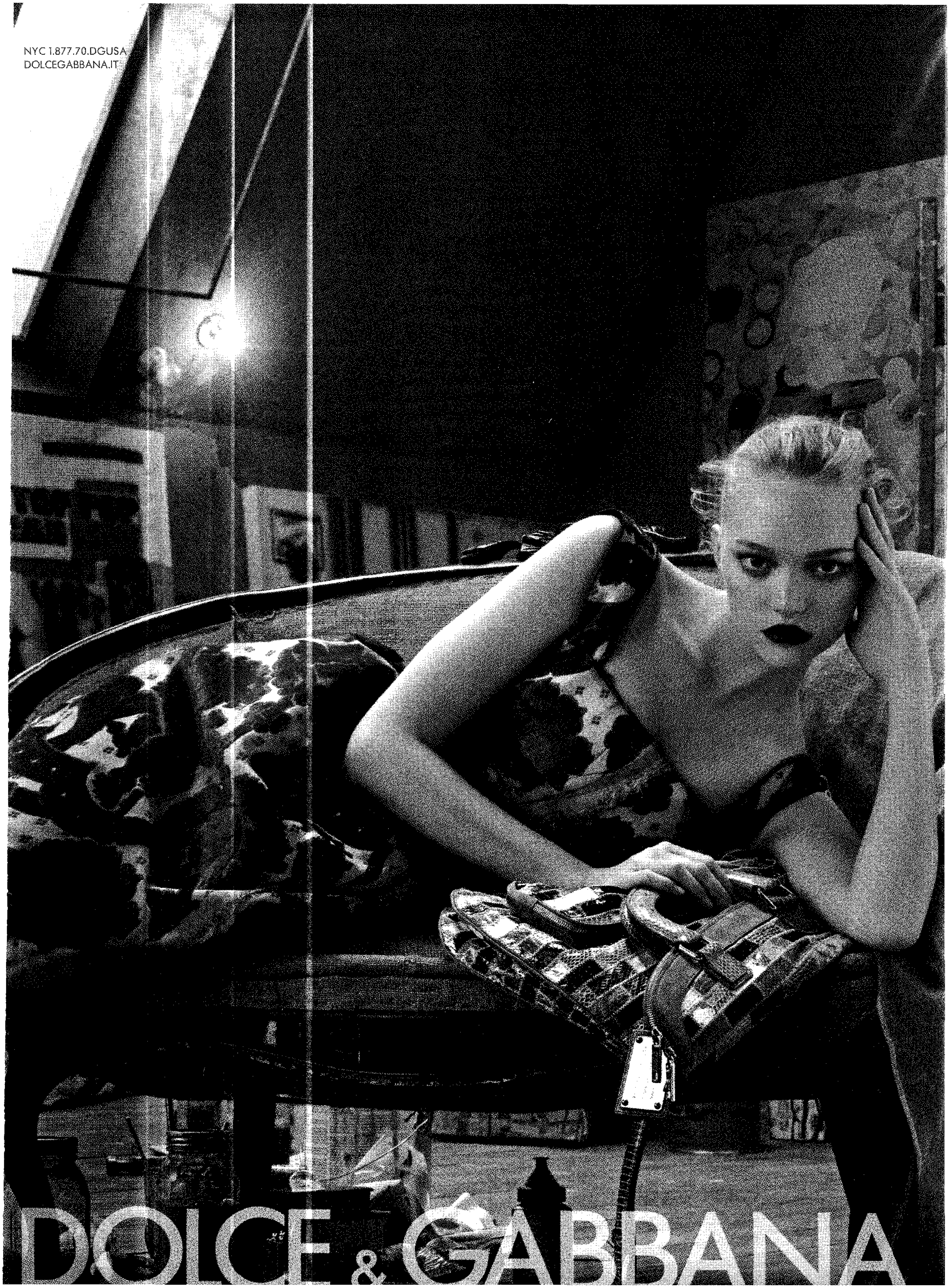
LOWER NINTH
Beau Willimon's Hurricane Katrina drama imagines the wretched hours passed by two men stranded on a New Orleans rooftop, awaiting rescuers who may or may not come. Malcolm (James McDaniel) is a Bible-waving sage who trusts in prayer, but E-Z (Gaius Charles), his barely acknowledged son, puts more faith in helicopters. E-Z's friend Lowboy (Gbenga Akinnagbe) is already dead; his corpse lies at their feet, baking under a tarp. The mood is monotony laced with dread: games of twenty questions that dissolve into arguments, and the unnerving forward march of heat, thirst, and stench. The brute facts of the disaster stubbornly resist Willimon's attempts to fold them into larger-scale mythmaking; it's in the understated or playful moments that these characters find authentic voice. Daniel Goldstein directs. (Flea, 41 White St. 212-352-3101.)

LUSTRE
Justin Bond, best known as the female (sort of) half of the cabaret duo Kiki & Herb, doffs his wig to host a glittery showcase of some of his favorite non-gender-specific performers, including M. Lamar and the seedy-glam dance troupe the Pixie Harlots. Although Bond can be just as delectably vicious as his geriatric alter ego, his lounge act carries a streak of earnest bohemianism, alternating barbs with ballads and sombre reminders of anti-transsexual violence. The evening feels a little half-cooked, but it more than justifies its political raison d'être and serves as a welcome platform for Bond, who continues to make a fine career of androgyny and arsenic. (P.S. 122, at 150 First Ave., at 9th St. 212-352-3101. Through March 9.)

MACBETH
To the verbalization of tragic frenzy, Rupert Goold's inspired modern-dress Stalinist version of "Macbeth," starring Patrick Stewart, adds a scenic and sonic frenzy that is symphonic in its orchestration and its penetration. Here, Shakespeare's witchy Weird Sisters are the Nursing Sisters, who greet Macbeth in the ward with a prophecy of his rise to power, and who are all the more terrifying because they successfully masquerade as part of the ordinary world. As Macbeth, Patrick Stewart is masterly; he makes the character's journey from tentativeness to tyranny with unhistrionic aplomb. He's easy in his body and he's playful, which makes his outbursts all the more terrifying. But the age difference between him and Lady Macbeth (the fine, fierce Kate Fleetwood) raises the vexing issue of masculinity, and that works well for the complexity of Macbeth's balky bloodlust. (3/3/08) (BAM's Harvey Theatre, 651 Fulton St., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100.)

PARADISE PARK
Signature Theatre Company presents a new play by Charles Mee, about a fictional amusement park. (Peter Norton Space, 555 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529.)

PASSING STRANGE
This finely crafted, ethnic-minded musical, by the musician and singer Stew, is a brilliant work about its hero's migration beyond the tenets of "blackness" and toward selfhood. Stew, Heidi Rodewald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(who co-wrote the music), and the exceptionally gifted director, Annie Dorsen, have created a work of such singularity that it prompts comparisons less to traditional theatre than to the eccentric iconoclasm of the producer Prince Paul, who ushered in the sound of the New Negro. In the show's Broadway incarnation (it originated at the Public last year), it continues to break new ground, casually flouting any notions of what a Broadway musical ought to walk or talk like. With a fine, exuberant performance by Daniel Breaker, as Stew's peripatetic younger self. (Belasco, 111 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.)

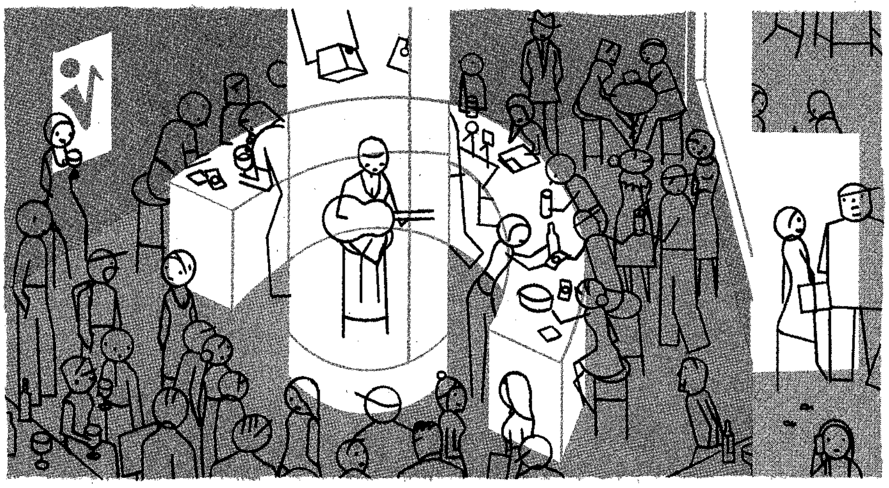
(RUS)H
A drama by James Scruggs, Kristin Marting, and Hal Eagar, in which a man becomes involved with a gay hustler, who is then murdered. Marting directs. (3LD Art & Technology Center, 80 Greenwich St. 212-352-3101.)

THE SLUG BEARERS OF KAYROL ISLAND (OR, THE FRIENDS OF DR. RUSHOWER)
Ben Katchor and Mark Mulcahy's delightful musical fable tells the story of the Rushowers, a Manhattan family who discover the plight of Third World stevedores who transport the lead slugs that give our small appliances "the impression of heft and worth." Gorgeous, semi-animated projections of Katchor's art work, bursting with color and shown on three large screens, function both as sets and as part of the action. Though the cast is uneven—Peter Friedman is terrific as Dr. Rushower, Matt Pearson makes a strangely aloof slug bearer—and the plot misfires a bit in the second act, the show succeeds on the strength of Katchor's imagination and Mulcahy's outstanding jazz-inflected score, performed live by a four-piece band. (Vineyard, 108 E. 15th St. 212-353-0303.)

SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE
In Stephen Sondheim's 1984 Pulitzer Prize-winning musical, George (Daniel Evans) works away feverishly at his masterpiece, "A Sunday Afternoon on La Grande Jatte." In the ingenious first act of this admirably ambitious but patchy musical, Sondheim and the playwright James Lapine adopt pointillist narrative techniques to make Seurat's search for a new, luminous form match their own quest for new musical shapes. Self-absorbed, passive, confused, detached from Dot (Jenna Russell), George's coyly named model and mistress, who bears him a child, George makes a painting that is dynamic, but he is not. In Sam Buntrock's lively revival, the novelty of digital animation substitutes for the novelty of the musical's original innovation. But nothing can reanimate the strained, deadly second act, which imagines Seurat's contemporary relative, who gives off not light so much as a sort of cultural gas. (3/3/08) (Studio 54, at 254 W. 54th St. 212-239-6200.)

TAKE ME ALONG
The fusty 1959 adaptation by Bob Merrill ("Funny Girl"), Joseph Stein ("Fiddler on the Roof"), and Rob Russell of Eugene O'Neill's only comedy, "Ah, Wilderness!," is receiving a surprisingly enjoyable revival at the Irish Repertory. The plot follows the excursions of an early-century Connecticut family over the course of one Independence Day weekend. Boys come of age, men renew broken promises to steadfast objects of semi-devotion, and women remain either fussy neurotics or brassy tarts. This production is standard American musical-theatre fare—hammy, syrupy, irrelevant—but certainly worth appreciating, in no small part for its impeccable cast of seasoned performers. (132 W. 22nd St. 212-727-2737.)

TWO THOUSAND YEARS
Mike Leigh's latest work to be produced by the New Group (under the direction of Scott Elliott) is about a middle-class Jewish family in England whose pat cultural orientation—*Guardian*-reading, staunchly secular—is challenged by a series of unrelated events, beginning with the religious reawakening of their son (Jordan Gelber). While the play touches on fissures in Jewish identity, it's also in part about the need to have something to cling to. Yet the play itself is unmoored,



LAURENT CILLUFFO

SMALL ROOMS UNDER THE RADAR

Big venues with big talent get all the attention, but there's excellent music in little clubs all over town. Here are a dozen.

BANJO JIM'S
9th St. at Avenue C (212-777-0869)—To get to the bar inside this minuscule rose-colored roadhouse, it's often necessary to weave a course through twirling two-steppers. The musicians play country, jazz, and folk.

DEATH BY AUDIO
49 S. 2nd St., Brooklyn (no phone)—At this pleasantly dilapidated space, which has the air of a suburban seventies-era rec room, influential local tastemakers, like the promoter Todd P, host a stream of bands from such divergent subgenres as noise pop, Balkan dance music, and stoner metal.

DROM
85 Avenue A (212-777-1157)—Drom, which means "journey" in Romany, has a spacious Japanese-influenced cocktail bar in front and a performance room in back, with clear sight lines to the stage. The bookings here span the world, and recent and upcoming acts include the Turkish pop star Deniz Seki and the Japanese koto master Michiyo Yagi.

GOODBYE BLUE MONDAY
1087 Broadway, Brooklyn (718-453-6343)—The owner, Steve Trimboli, a colorful impresario and longtime veteran of the city's music scene, describes this eccentric outpost in Bushwick as a "free-form-I-book-anybody venue." The walls are covered with assorted detritus (a mixture of "tchotchke art, trash art, and real art," Trimboli calls it), and the space is cheap (a glass of "good" wine is four bucks, "better" just five).

HANK'S SALOON
46 Third Ave., Brooklyn (718-625-8003)—This diminutive, hundred-year-old tavern in downtown Brooklyn might soon be like the Upper East Side's famous P. J. Clarke's, dwarfed by high-rise condominiums and skyscrapers. (Atlantic Yards is slated to rise nearby.) Hank's has menacing flames painted on its exterior, but it's a friendly dive, with alternative-country, rockabilly, and garage-rock bands.

JAZZ GALLERY
290 Hudson St. (212-242-1063)—This nonprofit venue is not a place to drink (there's no bar) or to hang out (there are no sofas or settees, just fifty folding chairs and some benches). But, with its compact stage and impeccable acoustics, it is a place to discover emerging players, many of whom already have solid reputations as sidemen. A-list players can be found here, too: the saxophonist Steve Coleman conducts a weekly composers' workshop on Monday nights.

MONKEY TOWN
58 N. 3rd St., Brooklyn (718-384-1369)—One of the more original recent additions to the New York nightlife scene, this intimate space has low couches around its perimeter. The musicians perform in the center while visuals are projected on the walls around them (and on the audience). For the most part, only musical acts that are willing to engage in a cinematic collaboration are booked, and a widely diverse group—including the Dirty Projectors, Ikue Mori, and Damo Suzuki, from Can—has taken up the challenge.

PETE'S CANDY STORE
709 Lorimer St., Brooklyn (718-302-3770)—A Mecca for outer-borough concertgoers, Pete's has a dark, cozy back room that resembles a cabaret car on the Orient Express. Along with hosting regular readings and trivia contests, Pete's is one of the city's most respected listening rooms among the indie-folk set.

ROCKWOOD MUSIC HALL
196 Allen St. (212-477-4155)—This extremely intimate lounge, where audiences pay close attention to the lyrics, boasts a sparkling baby grand that dominates the stage and occupies much of the room. The acoustics—no doubt influenced by a combination of the piano, the exposed brick, and the owner, Ken Rockwood, who, on most nights, runs sound—lend warmth to each song, harking back to the days of vinyl.

SMALLS
183 W. 10th St. (212-252-5091)—In its nineties heyday, this little jazz club was the breeding ground for a whole generation of now significant players, including Brad Mehldau, Kurt Rosenwinkel, and Mark Turner. The economic aftereffects of 9/11 hurt the club; last year, Lee Kostrinsky and Spike Wilner, two musicians, bought it. They retained the founder, Mitch Borden, as a wise gatekeeper, and installed a sleek bar, a new piano, and more comfortable seating.

UNION POOL
484 Union Ave., Brooklyn (718-609-0484)—Three years ago, the owners of this popular Williamsburg establishment turned its back room into an inviting performance space, with red velvet curtains, a high stage, and an excellent sound system. Mostly local bands, including, on occasion, the neighborhood icons TV on the Radio, frequent the stage here, and the only drawback is that it can get as crowded as the L train at rush hour.

ZEBULON
258 Wythe Ave., Brooklyn (718-218-6934)—Three Frenchmen with a love of John Coltrane run this softly lit, dark-wood bistro. The slate here includes jazz and rock musicians, Afro-pop artists (Kaleta, a guitarist who has played with Fela Kuti and King Sunny Adé, performs often), singer-songwriters, and, since Tonic's demise, last year, some of the downtown musicians who used to frequent that venue.

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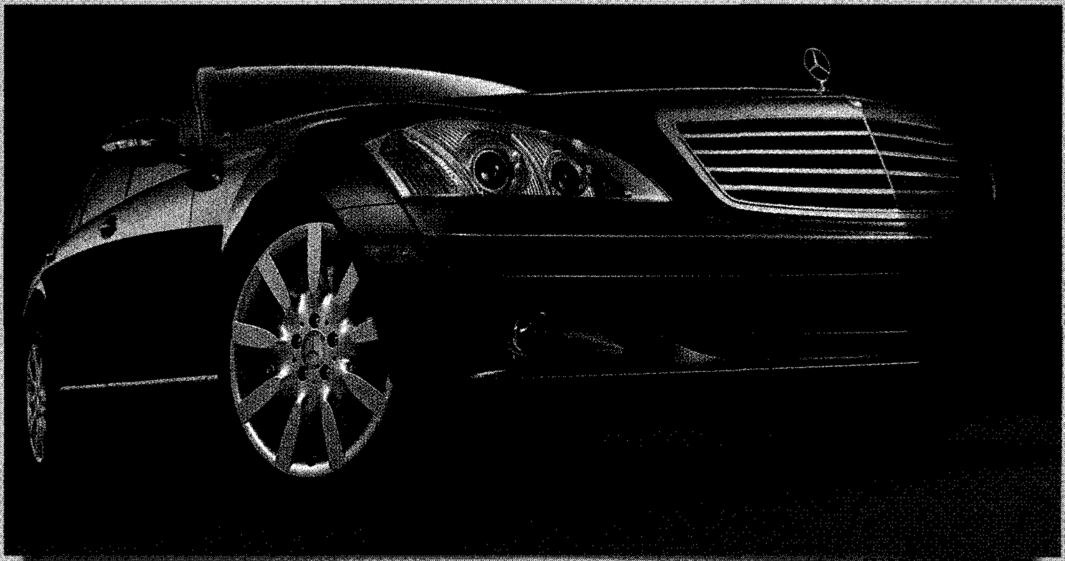

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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
THE POWER OF TWO

It seems like the deck is stacked against the French dance-music duo Justice. First, they were booked for a show at Madison Square Garden, on March 11—a brave, maybe even foolish move for any French dance act other than Daft Punk, who pulled off a massively successful concert tour last summer. (The document of that tour, "Alive 2007," is the rarest of birds: an excellent live album by a band that plays no live instruments.) Further hampering Justice is the fact that their squelchy disco sounds an awful lot like Daft Punk's music. So far, Justice's bravery has proven to be a form of hubris. Because of poor ticket sales, the show was relocated downstairs to the smaller WaMu theatre, where there is little room to dance. They will have to prove that they aren't just another Daft Punk imitator (like, say, Faux Punk, which plays at Music Hall of Williamsburg on March 7). People are still talking about Daft Punk and their stage pyramid of lights. Justice's main prop is an enormous lit-up cross. They will need it.

—*Sasha Frere-Jones*

AKIKO KATO

unable to commit to any of its narrative strands or to raise the emotional pitch above that of an afternoon tea. The shrewd performances are well suited to Leigh's improvisation-based script, but in return it leaves them with nowhere to go. (Acorn, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

U.S. DRAG
The StageFARM presents a play by Gina Gionfriddo, about two recent college graduates who are looking for a criminal. Trip Cullman directs. (Beckett, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4100.)

Also Playing

AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY: Imperial, 245 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **AVENUE Q:** Golden, 252 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **CHICAGO:** Ambassador, 219 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200. **A CHORUS LINE:** Schoenfeld, 236 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **CURTAINS:** Al Hirschfeld, 302 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **FUERZABRUTA:** Daryl Roth, 20 Union Sq. E. 212-239-6200. **GRACE:** Lucille Lortel, 121 Christopher St. 212-279-4200. Through March 8. **HAIRSPRAY:** Neil Simon, 250 W. 52nd St. 212-307-4100. **THE HOMECOMING:** Cort, 138 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200. **IS HE DEAD?:** Lyceum, 149 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. Through March 9. **JERSEY BOYS:** August Wilson, 245 W. 52nd St. 212-239-6200. **JUMP:** Union Square Theatre, 100 E. 17th St. 212-307-4100. **LEGALLY BLONDE THE MUSICAL:** Palace, Broadway at 47th St. 212-307-4100. **THE LION KING:** Minskoff, 200 W. 45th St. 212-307-4747. **THE LITTLE MERMAID:** Lunt-Fontanne, 205 W. 46th St. 212-307-4747. **MAMMA MIA!:** Winter Garden, Broadway at 50th St. 212-239-6200. **MARY POPPINS:** New Amsterdam, 214 W. 42nd St. 212-307-4747. **MONTY PYTHON'S SPAMALOT:** Shubert, 225 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. **NOVEMBER:** Barrymore, 243 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200. **OROONOKO:** The Duke on 42nd Street, 229 W. 42nd St. 646-223-3010. Through March 9. **ROCK 'N' ROLL:** Bernard B. Jacobs, 242 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. Through March 9. **THE SEAFARER:** Booth, 222 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **SPRING AWAKENING:** Eugene O'Neill, 230 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200. **THE 39 STEPS:** American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-719-1300. **WICKED:** Gershwin, 222 W. 51st St. 212-307-4100. **XANADU:** Helen Hayes, 240 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.

NIGHT LIFE
ROCK AND POP

Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.

BAGGOT INN
82 W. 3rd St. (212-477-0622)—March 7: **Caleb Stine** and the **Brakemen**, an Americana ensemble out of Baltimore, play music that is appropriately trainlike—steady and powerful. Stine, who is lanky and bearded, croons narratives—often without choruses—that wind seamlessly through cities and relationships. With the on-the-money, urban-country stylings of **Andy Friedman** (an artist and contributor to this magazine) and his band, the **Other Failures.**

BARBÈS
376 9th St., Park Slope, Brooklyn (718-965-9177)—March 8: The young composer and violist Lev Zhurbin, a Moscow-born Juilliard graduate known as Ljova, has worked with Osvaldo Golijov, the Kronos Quartet, Yo-Yo Ma, and the rapper Jay-Z. Here, he leads his **Ljova and the Kontraband,** a group with a richly textured palette featuring Eastern European and Gypsy melodies beautifully offset by Latin-tinged rhythms. Later that night, **Las Rubias del Norte** charm listeners with their jewel-box renditions of Latin big-band songs.

B. B. KING BLUES CLUB & GRILL
237 W. 42nd St. (212-997-4144)—March 5: **Paul Green's School of Rock Music All-Stars**—participants in an interactive music-education program—share the stage with **Jon Anderson,** best known as the piercing voice of the British progressive-rock juggernaut Yes. The young pupils will have their work cut out for them as they try to replicate Yes's signature brand of sonic filigree.

BEACON THEATRE
Broadway at 74th St. (212-307-7171)—March 7-8: **Levon Helm** has been making music for more than four decades. Most famous for his role as the drummer and vocalist in the Band, he's also been an actor ("Coal Miner's Daughter"), and he's a throat-cancer survivor. In recent years, he's been holding court at his recording studio, which is in a barn attached to his home, in Woodstock, leading the folksy concerts he calls "Midnight Rambles." They've attracted an enthusiastic crowd, and some of the leading lights in the worlds of country, folk, pop, and jazz (Emmylou Harris, Ricky Scaggs, Elvis Costello, and Steven Bernstein are just a few of the many unannounced guest performers who have joined him). Helm recently released his first studio album in twenty-five years, "Dirt Farmer," and it just picked up a Grammy for Best Traditional Folk Album.

BOWERY BALLROOM
6 Delancey St. (212-533-2111)—March 10: He plays the organ and something called the Drum Buddy—his patented, analog, light-activated oscillating percussion machine. She plays the maracas, sings backup, and handles the puppets. Together they are **Quintron and Miss Pussycat,** a husband-and-wife performance duo on leave from the steamy precincts of New Orleans. They're touring with the **Black Lips,** a rollicking garage act from Atlanta with a softly psychedelic side.

HIGHLINE BALLROOM
431 W. 16th St. (212-414-5994)—March 8: The Philadelphia-born vocalist **Bilal,** who has appeared on albums by Common, Erykah Badu, and other hip-hop stars, deftly combines streams of jazz, hip-hop, funk, and soul in his music. A classically trained singer, he's comfortable with falsetto, scatting, and laying down smooth hip-hop verses. March 9: The harmony-heavy folk-pop of **Old Springs Pike,** a quartet fronted by the Broadway star John Gallagher, Jr. (who won a Tony for his role in "Spring Awakening").

JOE'S PUB
425 Lafayette St. (212-539-8777)—March 6: The singer, songwriter, and slide guitarist **Patty Larkin.** March 7: **One Ring Zero** turns out a literary klezmer-Gypsy-midway-music hybrid using the accordion, the toy piano, various household appliances, and other exotic instruments. The core of the act is Michael Hearst and Joshua Camp, who are celebrating ten years of making music together. They'll be joined by the writer **Jonathan Ames, Las Rubias del Norte** (see Barbès), and others.

KNITTING FACTORY
74 Leonard St., between Broadway and Church St. (212-219-3132)—March 5: The **Tony Danza Tapdance Extravaganza.** Those expecting an appearance by the affable star of such sitcoms as "Who's the Boss?" and "Taxi" should stay home. This act is a quintet from Tennessee that plays implausibly heavy "grindcore" music. As its name suggests, however, the band delivers its high-volume onslaught with a sense of humor. The Danza boys will be joined by **Born of Osiris, See You Next Tuesday,** and **Beneath the Massacre.**

LIVING ROOM
154 Ludlow St. (212-533-7235)—March 6: **Griffin House,** a singer-songwriter from Nashville whose work is familiar to viewers of the nighttime soap "One Tree Hill," sets up shop to preview his forthcoming album, "Flying Upside Down."

MERCURY LOUNGE
217 E. Houston St. (212-260-4700)—March 4: **Dengue Fever,** a polyethnic six-piece band out of Los Angeles with a growing following, plays trippy Cambodian pop songs from the sixties. The lead singer, Chhom Nimol, is a native of Battambong who sings in Khmer. March 5: The **Slits** come from the same British punk scene as the Sex Pistols and the Clash, but their bracingly

WE ALL WALK IN DIFFERENT SHOES.
GAY MARRIED COUPLE, JOANNA AND NICOLETTA TESSLER, WITH THEIR DAUGHTER, RUTHIE.
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Brian Finke's photograph "Sara, Icelandair, 2006," in his exhibition at ClampArt.

original music makes both of those celebrated bands sound positively conventional. While their peers played as hard and as fast as their testosterone allowed, the all-female Slits took the expansive pulse of reggae and laced it with amateurish singing and guitar-playing (less strumming, more scraping), paving the way for countless post-punk bands to follow.

MUSIC HALL OF WILLIAMSBURG

66 N. 6th St., Brooklyn (718-486-5400)—March 4-5: **Jonathan Richman,** a hero to romantic eccentrics the world over. In the early seventies, he and his band, the Modern Lovers, crafted an influential middle ground between the avant-garde drone of the Velvet Underground and the stentorian wallop of the Stooges. A curious change of heart, years ago, found Richman renouncing his band's blunt, burly sound, and freed him to make gentle, whimsical music. With the fearless songwriter **Vic Chesnutt.** March 6: In the late nineties, when the **Hives** made their début, they seemed poised to ride the neo-garage-rock boom to global dominance. Four albums later, however, the sharply dressed band of smirking Swedes has proved itself to be something of a one-trick pony. While its latest release, "The Black and White Album," finds it stretching out a bit more stylistically, the band is sticking to its high-energy, high-voltage, high-camp attack. With the **Donnas,** a hard-rocking group of women who, when they started out, took fake names à la the Ramones. They've since dropped that shtick, without losing a beat. March 7: The Daft Punk cover band **Faux Punk.** March 11: **Quintron** and **Miss Pussycat.** With the **Black Lips** (see the Bowery Ballroom.)

TERMINAL 5

610 W. 56th St. (212-582-6600)—The **Plug Awards,** a relative newcomer to the universe of music-industry accolades, has a populist bent (fans vote online). On March 6, it celebrates its winners and nominees with performances by the fervently revered dark balladeer **Nick Cave** and his band the **Bad Seeds,** the winsome indie-pop chanteuse **St. Vincent,** the British rapper **Dizzee Rascal,** and the earnest singer-songwriter **José González.** The comedian **Patton Oswalt** is the host. March 7: The **Hives** and the **Donnas** (see the Music Hall of Williamsburg).

WAMU THEATRE

Madison Square Garden (212-307-7171)—March 11: The Continental dance-music duo **Justice.**

WEBSTER HALL

125 E. 11th St. (212-353-1600)—March 8: **Sia,** a mellow folkie from Australia with a smoky voice, is known to some for her work with the down-tempo British electronica act Zero 7. Others might know her by her song "Breathe Me," which was used on the finale of the HBO series "Six Feet Under."

WORLD MUSIC INSTITUTE

March 8: The Eunice, Louisiana, native Marc Savoy is an accomplished accordion maker and player as well as a persuasive ambassador of Cajun culture. His **Savoy-Doucet Cajun Band**—which features his wife, Ann, on guitar, and the Beausoleil fiddler Michael Doucet—is his most successful tool (aside, perhaps, from the come-one, come-all jam sessions at his accordion factory, in southwestern Louisiana). The group mixes traditional songs and originals, with Ann Savoy using French dialect and earthy phrasing to capture the joys and sorrows of backcountry life. With **D. L. Menard,** who is known as the Cajun Hank Williams. (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. For more information, call 212-545-7536.)

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

BIRDLAND

315 W. 44th St. (212-581-3080)—**Ron Carter's** promotion of the bass as a solo instrument is taken to new heights in his string-heavy nonet (here March 5-8), which features the leader on the piccolo bass, surrounded by an ensemble that includes an additional bass and three cellos. Sundays: **Chico O'Farrill's Afro-Cuban Jazz Orchestra.** The late arranger and bandleader O'Farrill was one of the grand architects of Afro-Cuban jazz. His son **Arturo,** who is a persuasive pianist in his own right, keeps up his dad's deft balance of steaming Latin rhythms, fervid bop improvisation, and resonant horn charts. Tuesdays: **David Berger & the Sultans of Swing.** The composer and arranger Berger has an ace up his sleeve. His idiomatically immaculate big band includes **Champian Fulton,** an assured vocalist with a galvanizing presence.

BLUE NOTE

131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (212-475-8592)—March 6-9: In performance, the singer **Diane Schuur** never lacks enthusiasm or suffers from flagging spirits. Her commitment to keeping an audience's attention is as constant as her technical gifts.

CORNELIA STREET CAFÉ

29 Cornelia St. (212-989-9319)—March 8: The **Ron Horton** quartet. If you've investigated any of the super-smart live projects or recordings by the now moribund Jazz Composers Collective, then you've most likely heard the trumpeter Horton. A tart-toned modernist who has also graced the bands of Jane Ira Bloom, Horton will be presenting original compositions from his latest album, "Everything in a Dream."

DIZZY'S CLUB COCA-COLA

Broadway at 60th St. (212-258-9595)—March 4-9: The time-honored tradition of the tenor-saxophone battle gets the spotlight when two promising younger soloists, **Seamus Blake** and **Stacy Dillard,** go head to head, backed by the pianist **Eric Reed** and his trio.

FEINSTEIN'S AT LOEWS REGENCY

540 Park Ave., at 61st St. (212-339-4095)—March 4-15: **Tovah Feldshuh,** a dramatic actress with a flair for the comic, displays her vocal talents.

IRIDIUM

1650 Broadway, at 51st St. (212-582-2121)—March 5: The **Ed Palermo Big Band** plays the music of Frank Zappa. The absence of Zappa's corrosive humor and biting social critique, as well as his inventive guitar playing and conducting, is the elephant in the room, but Palermo's reinterpretations of the rock iconoclast's work do a persuasive job of elevating Zappa the composer. March 6-9: The **Herbie Hancock Project** salutes the ever-evolving pianist and composer (and winner of this year's Grammy for Best Album). **George Colligan** holds down the keyboard chair, while the trumpeter **Wallace Roney,** the saxophonist **Steve Wilson,** the bassist **Buster Williams,** and the drummer **Lenny White** make up the core band. They will be joined by the vibraphonist **Joe Locke,** on the 8th, and the trumpeter **Tom Harrell,** on the 9th. Mondays belong to the electric-guitar innovator **Les Paul.** The **Mingus Big Band** takes over on Tuesdays.

JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER

Broadway at 60th St. (212-721-6500)—March 7-8: The pianist **Monty Alexander,** a proud scion of Jamaica, drops by the Allen Room for a tribute to the music of the Caribbean; the program includes Trinidadian calypso and his native mento.

JAZZ STANDARD

116 E. 27th St. (212-576-2232)—March 4-5: **Judy Niemack,** a bracing presence on the vocal-jazz scene for more than thirty years, can expect particularly strong support from a band that includes the trumpeter **Don Sickler,** the pianist **Stephen Scott,** and the drummer **John Riley** among the standout players. March 6-9: Three veterans with deep experience in both mainstream and free jazz—the saxophonist **Oliver Lake,** the bassist **Reggie Workman,** and the drummer **Andrew Cyrille**—are joined by a younger but no less imaginative and unclassifiable player, the pianist **Geri Allen.**

THE STONE

Avenue C at 2nd St. (No phone)—March 7: The inventive drummer and composer **Bobby Previte** leads his New Bump band, a quartet featuring **Bill Ware,** on vibes, and **Ellery Eskelin,** on saxophone. Expect music from his forthcoming album, "Set the Alarm for Monday." March 8: The in-

TOD'S

defatigable saxophonist **John Zorn** leads a benefit for this small nonprofit performance space, which he founded in 2005. He'll be joined by a plethora of special guests with left-of-center leanings, including the guitarist **Elliott Sharp.** (For more information, visit www.thestonenyc.com.)

VILLAGE VANGUARD
178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (212-255-4037)—March 4-9: The **Lou Donaldson** quartet. The inimitable alto saxophonist Donaldson delivers a high-style blend of authentic bop and good-time R. & B. The **Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** holds sway on Mondays.

ZANKEL HALL
Carnegie Hall, 57th St. at Seventh Ave. (212-247-7800)—March 5: The **SFJAZZ Collective,** an offshoot of the nonprofit presenters of the San Francisco Jazz Festival, hits town. With the saxophonist **Joe Lovano** and the trumpeter **Dave Douglas** leading the charge, backed by a crack band with such stalwarts as the pianist **Renee Rosnes** and the drummer **Eric Harland,** the evening is heavy with promise. They'll be performing Wayne Shorter compositions, which is even more promising.

ART
MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (212-535-7710)—The influence that Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665) had on other painters, from Cézanne to Picasso, is far-reaching, but **"Poussin and Nature: Arcadian Visions"** focusses on the artist's poetic affinities. Starting around the time that Poussin settled in Rome, in 1624, the show opens with a roomful of paintings built around scenes from Ovid's Metamorphoses. They are grand, lush, and languidly erotic, with nude bodies echoing the elements of the landscapes. This is nowhere more evident than in a small painting of Daphne semi-transformed into a laurel tree, but elsewhere women's supine bodies undulate like the hills behind them, and satyrs' craggy heads recall rock formations. The poignancy of the artist's later work is profound; mortality, and the possibility of trouble in paradise, adds a satisfying bitterness to the prelapsarian sweet. Through May 11. ♦ **"Gustave Courbet."** Through May 18. ♦ **"Jasper Johns: Gray."** Through May 4. ♦ **"Tara Donovan at the Met."** Through April 27. ♦ **"Lee Friedlander: A Ramble in Olmsted Parks."** Through May 11. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9400)—**"Color Chart: Reinventing Color, 1950 to Today."** Through May 12. ♦ **"Lucian Freud: The Painter's Etchings."** Pictures don't get more arresting than Freud's confrontations with forms of flesh—which, when face-shaped, may be termed portraits. The show proves that the artist's driven scrutiny of lumps and dimples satisfies most cleanly in his etchings, absent the fuss of his paintings' sullen colors and dirty-meringue textures. An etching needle beats a brush at detailing the insults of carnal fact to egoist fancy. Freud's secret of true happiness: be a dog. His pet whippets advertise the bliss of consciousness at one with sinew, bone, and whisker. Through March 10. ♦ **"Design and the Elastic Mind."** Through May 12. ♦ **"Jan De Cock: Denkmal 11."** Through April 14. (Open Wednesdays through Mondays, 10:30 to 5:30, and Friday evenings until 8.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-423-3500)—**"Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want to Believe"** packs the museum's spiral with strident installations, noisy videos, and huge drawings that were made—in a flash—with gunpowder. Suspended cars emit flares of light. Veristic wolves pile up against a glass wall. An epic sculptural tableau of the Mao era, exhorting revolution, is reconstructed, and crumbles, on site. Firework events play and replay. The prince of internationally surging Chinese art, Cai revels in evocations of violence, often political, for the aesthetic heaven and disquieting hell of it. A benignant Taoist detachment may underlie his temerity. But, here and there, the breezy tone more than verges on callousness. Through May 28. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 10 to 5:45, and Fridays, 10 to 7:45.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
Madison Ave. at 75th St. (800-944-8639)—**"2008 Whitney Biennial."** Opens March 6. ♦ **"Chimneys and Towers: Charles Demuth's Late Paintings."** Through April 27. (Open Wednesdays, Thursdays, and weekends, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 1 to 9.)

BROOKLYN MUSEUM
200 Eastern Parkway (718-638-5000)—**"Ghada Amer: Love Has No End."** A small retrospective showcases some fifty works made in the last two decades by the Cairo-born, Paris-raised, and New York-based Ghada Amer. Her signature embroidered "paintings"—canvases in which women in pornographic poses are literally woven into what, from a distance, appear to be heroic gestural abstractions—deservedly hold center stage. Earlier works include canvases based on dress patterns, sculptural jumpsuits embroidered with text about Barbie and Ken, and a series of collages based on an Egyptian fashion magazine called *Venus* (which Amer calls "*Vogue* for the veiled woman"). More recent projects include a "Peace Garden" planted with carnivorous plants and a series of billboards trumpeting proverbs like "For the love of money truth will fall silent." Through Oct. 19. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5, and Saturdays and Sundays, 11 to 6.)

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
Central Park W. at 79th St. (212-769-5100)—**"Water: H_2O=Life."** Through May 26. ♦ Around five hundred specimens flit through the Butterfly Conservatory, a pocket-size hothouse planted with orchids and other flora. Through May 26. (Open daily, 10 to 5:45.)

ASIA SOCIETY
Park Ave. at 70th St. (212-288-6400)—**"Designed for Pleasure: The World of Edo Japan in Prints and Paintings, 1680-1860."** Through May 4. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 11 to 6, and Friday evenings until 9.)

COOPER-HEWITT NATIONAL DESIGN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 91st St. (212-849-8300)—**"Rococo: The Continuing Curve, 1730-2008."** Through July 6. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, 10 to 5, Fridays, 10 to 9, Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, noon to 6.)

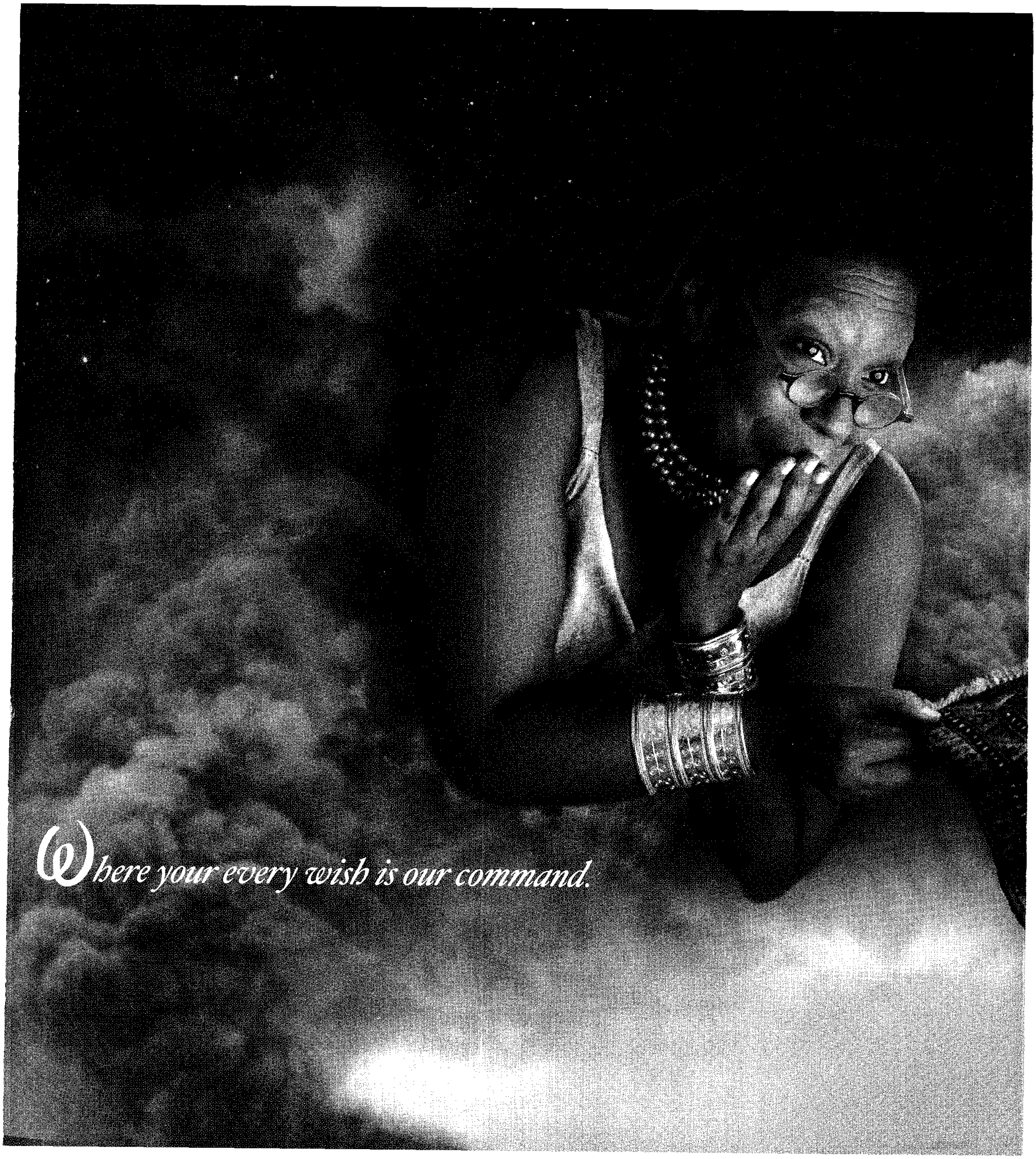
FRICK COLLECTION
1 E. 70th St. (212-288-0700)—You may be disappointed at first by the diabolically seductive portrait in **"Parmigianino's Antea: A Beautiful Artifice,"** on loan from Naples. Sleek in reproduction, the painting, of a probably imaginary young woman, is rather coarse when seen in person. But give the subject—her dainty chin, bee-stung lips, huge eyes, tapering fingers, perfect flesh, and Mona Lisa-ish air of erotic intelligence—time. The brushy handling of her gorgeous clothes aggrandizes her smoothly painted skin: undressing her, in effect. Everything works to arouse or to warn. Note the congeries of details at the level of her loins: soft gloves, a chain, and the sharp-toothed head of a marten pelt. Through April 27. (Open Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, 11 to 5.)

INTERNATIONAL CENTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY
1133 Sixth Ave., at 43rd St. (212-857-0000)—**"The Collections of Barbara Bloom"** revisits—and, in some cases, revises—the artist's output since the nineteen-eighties. The rear galleries are more cohesive and illuminating than those near the front, but Bloom's over-all project, which might be described as highlighting the weirdness of objects, shines through in one section after another. High points include an installation devoted to *kintsugi*, the Japanese practice of repairing ceramics with gold-laced lacquer to illuminate the breakage; a collection of Braille-embossed objects (an ashtray, a copy of *Playboy*); and a wall

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
ALFRED THE GREAT

What concertgoers may remember most from Alfred Brendel's recital at Carnegie Hall on Feb. 20, an immaculately cultured presentation of Viennese classics, was the silences. In Haydn's Variations in F Minor, in the Andante of Mozart's Sonata in F (K. 533/494), in Beethoven's Sonata Op. 27, No. 1, and, especially, in the nocturnal, flickering slow movement of Schubert's Sonata in B-Flat, Brendel invested the breaks between phrases with a particular weight. The fact that the august Austrian pianist, now in his late seventies, is on a yearlong farewell tour—this was his last New York recital, with a final American appearance to follow at Strathmore, outside of Washington, D.C., on March 17—might have led one to search out some sadness or brokenness in those silences. Instead, they had the quality of repose, of a man breathing in to utter his next words. For his last encore, Brendel played Schubert's Impromptu in G-Flat, which unfolds as one continuously murmuring, infinitely gentle song. The little pause before the ovation began was the deepest silence of all.

—Alex Ross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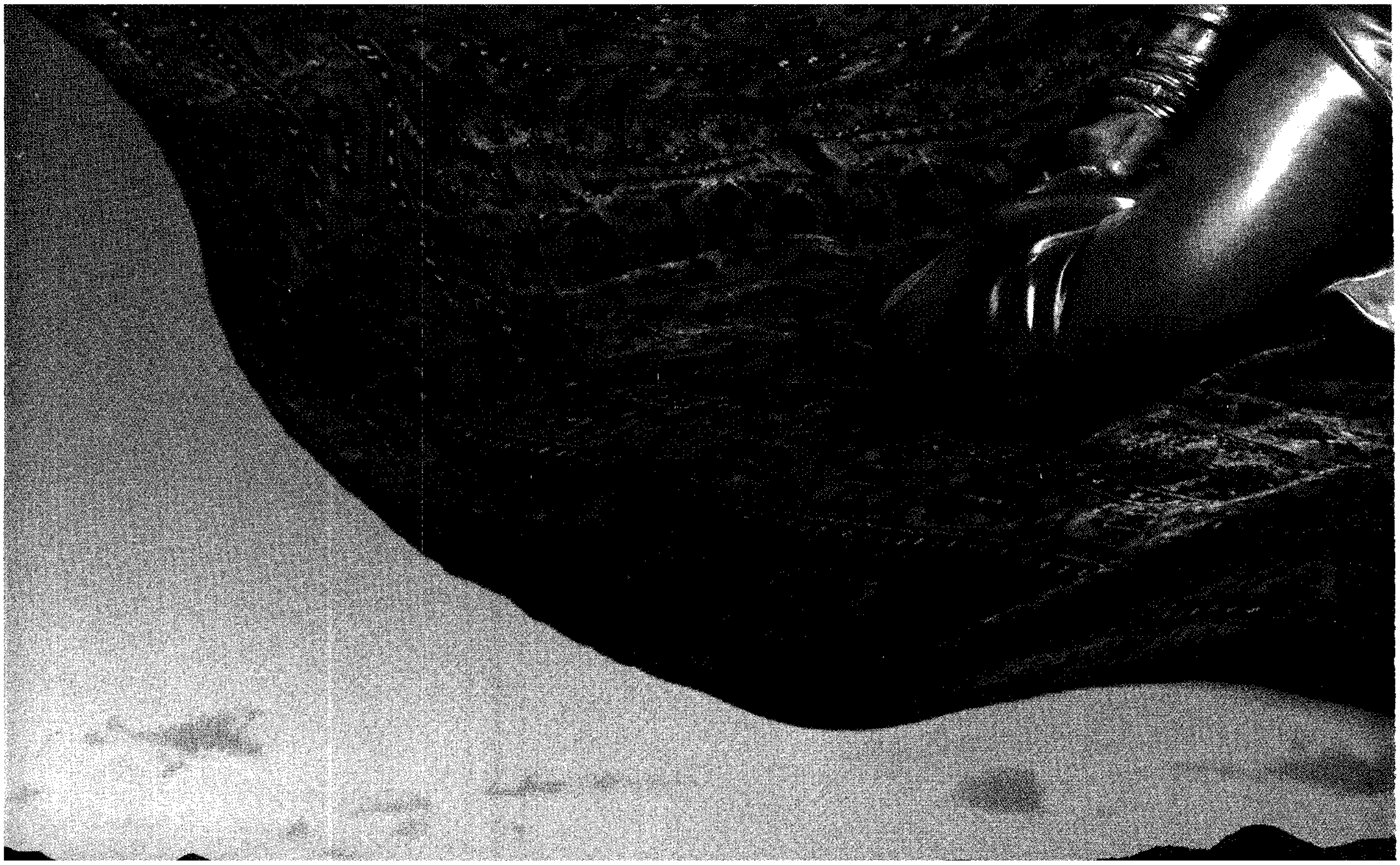

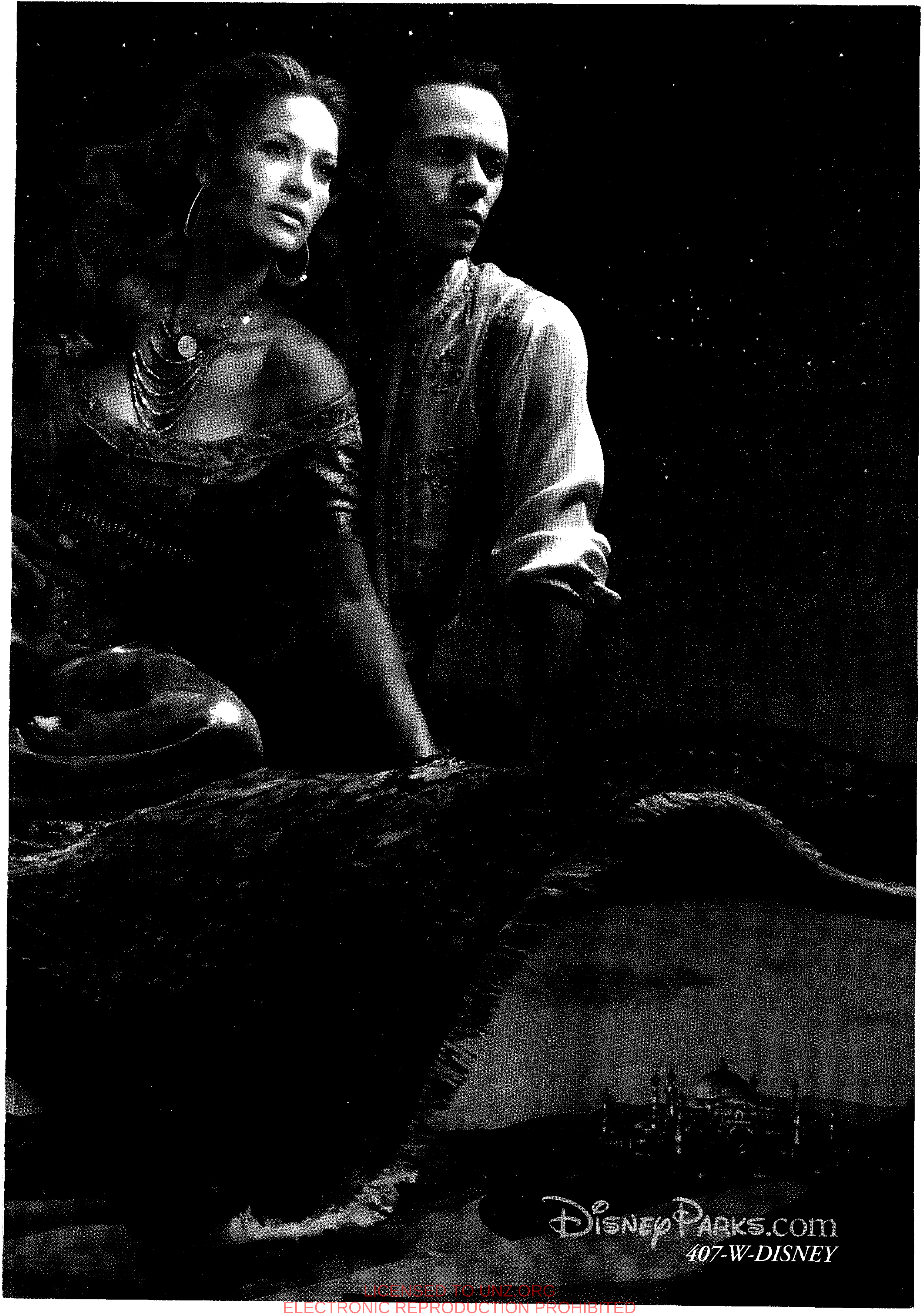
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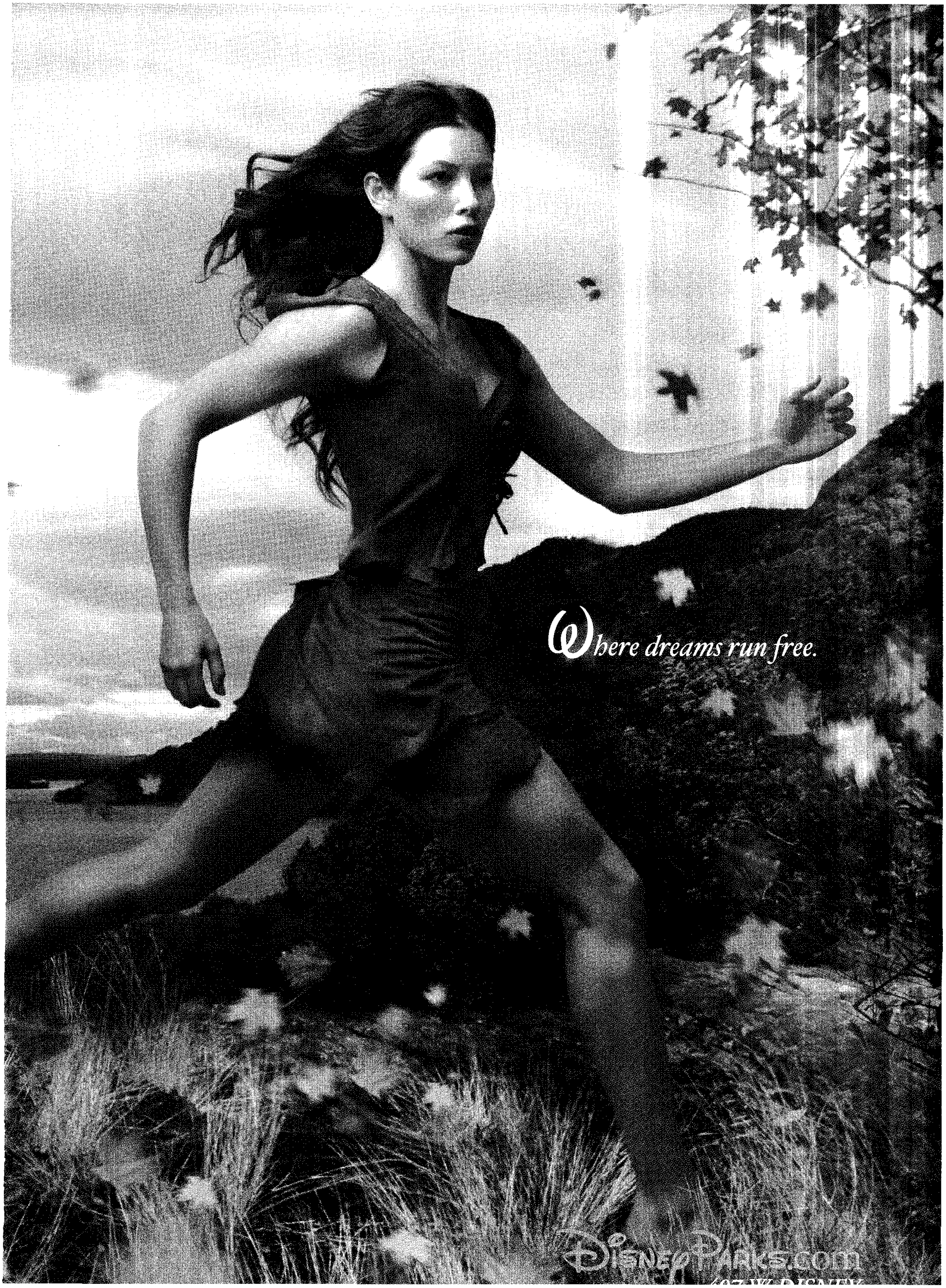
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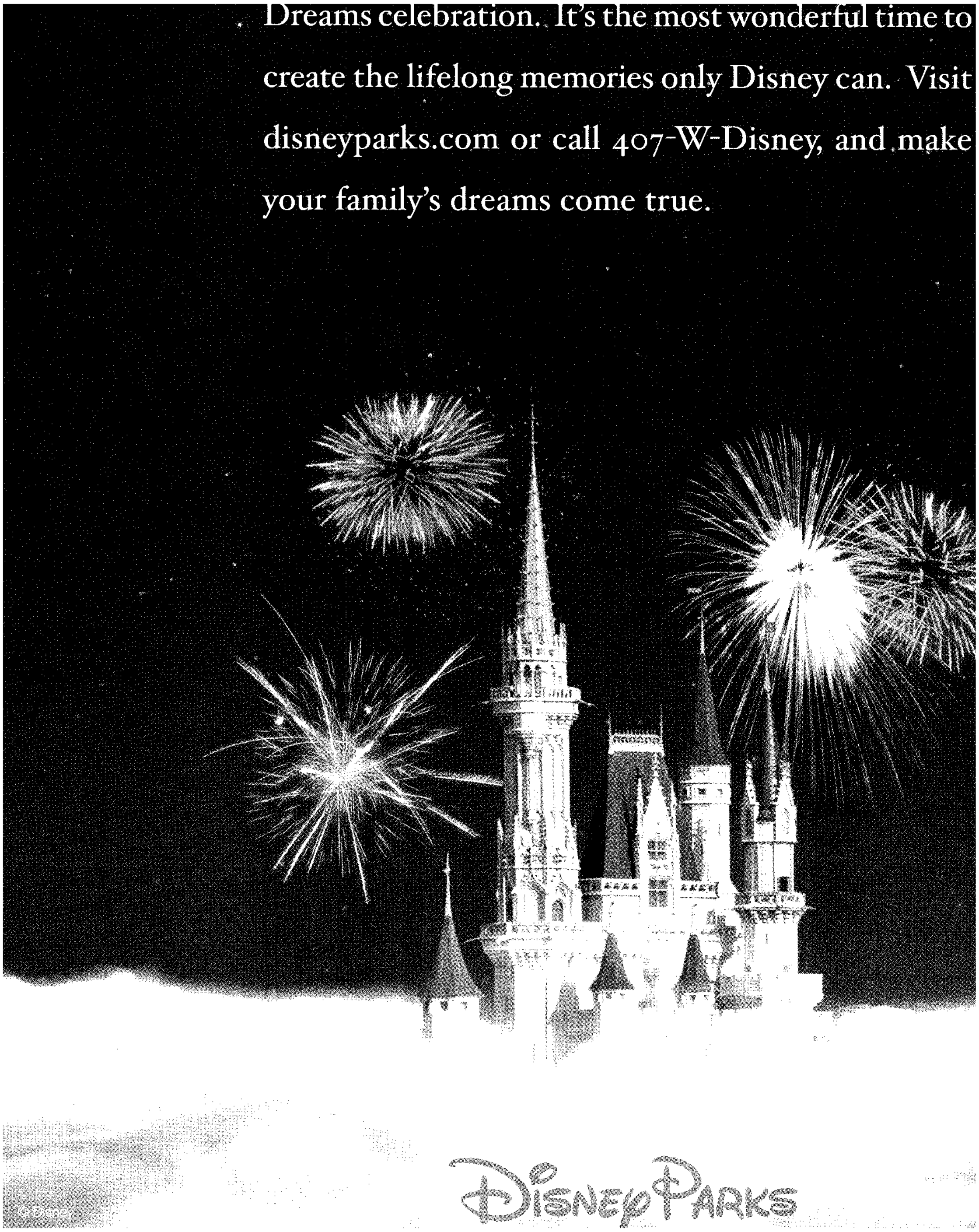

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of photographs that playfully examine the concept of framing. A grid of color samples, with such unlikely captions as "Nietzsche" and "Miranda Rights," offers a sense of Bloom's poetic-philosophical approach to the world and the objects that populate it. Through May 4. ♦ **"Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art."** Through May 4. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 10 to 6, and Friday evenings until 8.)

JEWISH MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 92nd St. (212-423-3200)—**"From The New Yorker to Shrek: The Art of William Steig."** Through March 16. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 11 to 5:45, and Thursdays, 11 to 8.)

MORGAN LIBRARY AND MUSEUM
225 Madison Ave., at 36th St. (212-685-0008)—**"Michelangelo, Vasari, and Their Contemporaries: Drawings from the Uffizi."** Through April 20. ♦ **"Close Encounters: Irving Penn Portraits of Artists and Writers."** Through April 13. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, 10:30 to 5, Fridays, 10:30 to 9, Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, 11 to 6.)

MUSEO DEL BARRIO
Fifth Ave. at 104th St. (212-831-7272)—Grainy photographs, dog-eared scripts, and scratchy film and audio clips of decades-old performances do not always make for a riveting exhibition, but **"Arte ≠ Vida: Actions by Artists of the Americas 1960-2000"** is just that. A treasure trove of information about avant-garde performance from the Caribbean and Latin America, the show presents art as political corrective, sensual respite, and social commentary. From the Brazilian *neoconcretismo,* of the sixties, to the acid comedy of San Diego's Border Arts Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo, in the nineties, more than a hundred artists are represented; much of the work here has had a profound influence on more familiar movements and artists. Through May 18. (Open Wednesdays through Sundays, 11 to 5.)

MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
Fifth Ave. at 103rd St. (212-534-1672)—**"Under New York Skies: Nocturnes by Yvonne Jacquette."** Through April 13. ♦ **"Street Dance: The New York Photographs of Rudy Burckhardt."** Through April 13. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 10 to 5.)

NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART
235 Bowery, at Prince St. (212-219-1222)—The museum inaugurates its new building with **"Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century,"** an international survey of recent sculpture that examines the antiheroic tendency in contemporary art. Through March 23. (Open Wednesdays and weekends, noon to 6, and Thursdays and Fridays, noon to 10.)

NEUE GALERIE
1048 Fifth Ave., at 86th St. (212-628-6200)—**"Gustav Klimt: The Ronald S. Lauder and Serge Sabarsky Collections."** Through June 30, 2008. (Open Thursdays, and Saturdays through Mondays, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 11 to 9.)

P.S. 1 CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER
22-25 Jackson Ave., at 46th Ave., Long Island City (718-784-2084)—**"WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution."** "WACK!" is a keen reminder that second-wave feminism coincided with other progressive movements—the sexual revolution clearly being one of them. The show is awash in liberated bodies, which appear in films, videos, photographs, collages, and paintings by Carolee Schneemann, Marina Abramovic, Lynda Benglis, Dara Birnbaum, Martha Rosler, Yoko Ono, and many others. Less politically inclined viewers can take refuge in the galleries that house lyrical paintings by Mary Heilman, Joan Snyder, Louise Fishman, Joan Semmel, and Sylvia Plimack Mangold. While "WACK!" doesn't do much to thwart criticism of the women's movement as predominantly white and middle-class (despite the inclusion of prominent black artists like Howardena Pindell, Betye Saar, and Adrian Piper), there is evidence of fractiousness within the ranks: Hannah Wilke's 1977 silk screen warns, "Marxism and Art: Beware of Fascist Feminism." Through May 31. (Open Thursdays through Mondays, noon to 6.)

ANA JUAN

SCULPTURECENTER
44-19 Purves St., Long Island City (718-361-1750)—**"Tom Burr: Addict-Love."** Through March 30. (Open Thursdays through Mondays, 11 to 6.)

STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM
144 W. 125th St. (212-864-4500)—**"Kori Newkirk: 1997-2007."** Through March 9. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, and Sundays, noon to 6, and Saturdays, 10 to 6.)

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

FRANZ KLINE
Kline was one of those legendary painters of the New York School who lived hard and died (relatively) young. His signature style relied on muscular, calligraphic brushstrokes and a palette that was pared down to black-and-white. "Heaume" and "Black Star," two canvases from the late nineteen-fifties, are the centerpieces of this modest but certifiably blue-chip show. Hung alongside them are paintings punctuated by occasional shards of color. A canvas titled "Ninth Street," is an homage to a then scrappy part of Greenwich Village that nurtured a now mythic generation of painters. Through March 15. (L&M Arts, 45 E. 78th St. 212-861-0020.)

IRVING PENN
Penn, master of the still-life—and virtually every other photographic genre he puts his hand to—has only ten small-scale pictures in his new show, but each is so intensely, lovingly observed that it deserves its own room. His subjects are antique vessels (a silvered glass cup, a brass coffeepot, several ceramic and enamelled pitchers) all showing signs of use, most seen in splendid isolation; they can be read as modest self-portraits. As in so much of Penn's work, there's a marvellous tension—an exquisite balance between flawlessness (of concept, of execution) and imperfection (of the objects themselves). Through March 29. (Pace/MacGill, 32 E. 57th St. 212-759-7999.)

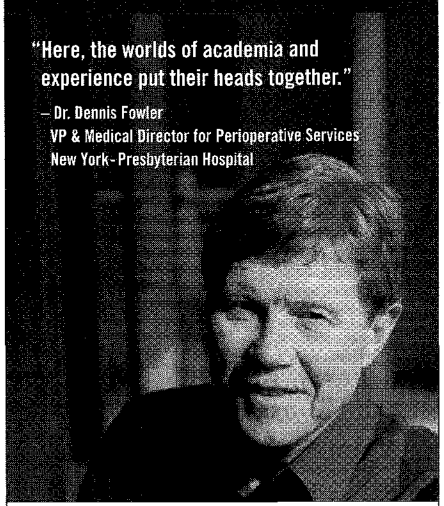
MARC RIBOUD
Riboud, one of Magnum's most prolific and long-lived photojournalists (he's eighty-five this year), works in the Cartier-Bresson tradition of personal reportage. This survey of photographs made all over the world includes a number of instantly recognizable images among many more that are unfamiliar. The best of the latter is a series from Castro's Cuba, taken in 1963, that turns into an essay on fashion as an expression of personal style. Riboud's famous image of a painter perched between girders on the Eiffel Tower is shown alongside others from the same 1953 shoot and a 2007 sequence that follows workers high atop the *Times* building, in New York. Through March 8. (Greenberg, 41 E. 57th St. 212-334-0010.)

Short List

CARROLL DUNHAM: Skarstedt, 20 E. 79th St. 212-737-2060. Through April 5. **MARK GROTJAHN:** Gagosian, 980 Madison Ave. 212-744-2313. Through March 11. **TIM NOBLE & SUE WEBSTER:** "Electric Fountain," Rockefeller Plaza. Through April 5. **JEFF WALL:** Goodman, 24 W. 57th St. 212-977-7160. Through March 22.

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

MARGARITA CABRERA / SHANNON PLUMB
The tree-of-life motif is familiar to fans of Mexican folk art—studded with fruit, birds, animals, angels, and Adam and Eve, it symbolizes creation. Cabrera borrows the image—which evolved from pre-Columbian Olmec traditions—and updates it as a kitschy emblem of Mexican agribusiness. A life-size John Deere tractor, pickax, and wheelbarrow are sculpted in clay and embellished with flowers and butterflies. In Plumb's video, the artist assumes the dual roles of her grandfather and grandmother, alternately appearing in a wig and



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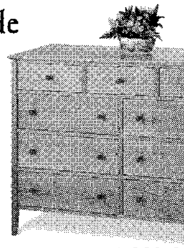

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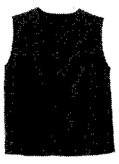

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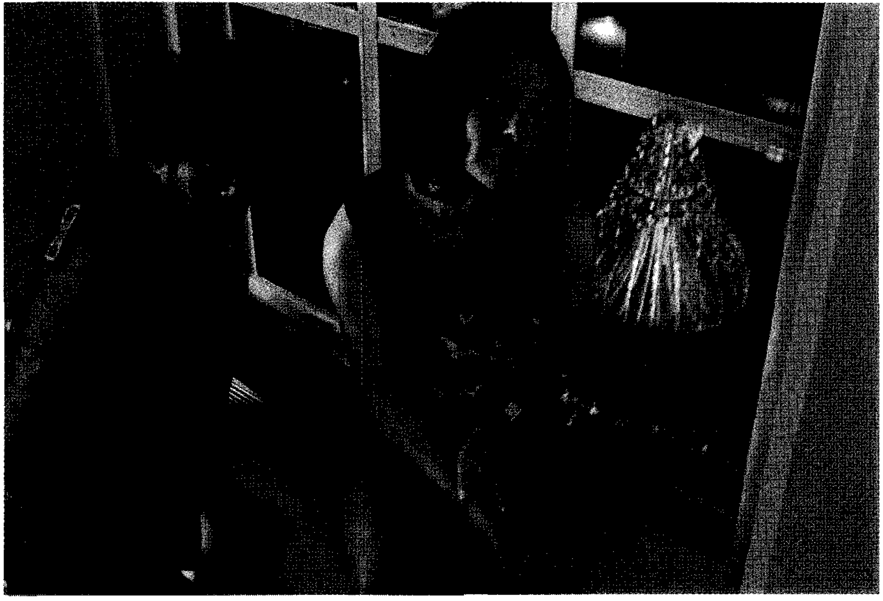
a leather blazer, and a housedress and badly smeared lipstick. It's a winning portrait of the solace and horror of long-term relationships. Through March 15. (Meltzer, 525-531 W. 26th St. 212-727-9330.)

DOUGLAS FLORIAN

The fifty-six gouache drawings on collaged paper in "The Liars and the Moonstruck" are selected from Florian's ongoing project "Sefer Shel Or." (When it's completed, the series will comprise six hundred and thirteen works, per the number of mitzvoth commanded by the Torah.) Florian describes the style of his small, uniformly sized works as "abstract regressionist," which may refer to the fact that his simple gestural marks hover on the edge of symbolism, suggesting suits in an unfamiliar deck of cards. The palette tends toward saturated viridian, tomato, ochre, and ultramarine. The project is abstruse and irresistible. Through March 8. (Bravin Lee, 526 W. 26th St. 212-462-4404.)

ROBERT GOBER

This slender, hypnotic pair of shows—works on paper and sculptures—finds Gober honing his highly personal, Neo-Surrealist take on Americana. In the hand-worked linoleum-block prints, a road winds through green hills until it vanishes under a cloud-flecked sky. The sculptures, which are mounted to the walls, replicate the seat and legs of a ragged wooden chair—the first that Gober owned in New York. A gun wraps around one, a bird's nest is tucked into another; wax breasts affixed to the seats look uncannily like staring eyes. Through March 29. (Marks, 521 W. 21st St. and 526 W. 22nd St. 212-243-0200.)



The British artists Tim Noble and Sue Webster, overlooking their neon-and-L.E.D. light sculpture, "Electric Fountain," installed through April 5 in Rockefeller Plaza.

YOLA MONAKHOV

MATTHEW RONAY

With these six tight Rorschachian sculptures assembled from wood (polished walnut, pine, maple, oak), string, canvas, metal, and so on, Ronay veers into more contemplative, less whimsical territory than in his last show at the gallery. Perhaps the times demand it. Unchanged is Ronay's impeccable craftsmanship and pristinely economical arrangements. Sections of his ambiguous rebuses suggest Islamic architecture, divining rods, sandbags, bottles, fern fronds—even a corpse. The accumulated mystery only increases with repeated viewing. Ronay is nothing if not deliberate and in control; viewers need only surrender to the reverie of free association. Through March 8. (Rosen, 525 W. 24th St. 212-627-6000.)

RUTH ROOT

Out in some chic precinct of the galaxy, one imagines a sleek spaceship with a holodeck that looks like a Ruth Root painting. Flat, shaped panels of aluminum, with rounded corners and tabs or flanges protruding from the sides, are painted in hard-edged fields of enamel in puce, chartreuse, gunmetal, apricot, beige, rose, and black. The mod lozenges of the supports paired with the parallelograms of color are optically zingy, if cumulatively a little predictable. A bonus comes in the unexpected guise of the press release, a wordless series of thumbnail images in which Root lays out a manifesto of her sources, from Ellsworth Kelly to shaped bathmats. Through March 15. (Kreps, 525 W. 22nd St. 212-741-8849.)

MIROSLAV TICHY

Tichy, the eccentric, reclusive Czech photographer whose work from the past several decades began appearing a few years ago, is a man obsessed. Using homemade cameras and unreliable film stock, he surreptitiously photographs small-town women sunbathing, strolling, bending over, walking with the kids, having a beer—ordinary women, ordinary activities, transformed by the unflagging fervor of his attention and the deliberate carelessness of his technique. The fifty little prints here, all unique, are not just badly focussed, they're often dirty, scratched, foxed, or chewed by insects. Yet the effect is never degrading, it's hallucinatory: women are apparitions, amazing, tantalizing, and mysterious. Through March 15. (Bonakdar, 521 W. 21st St. 212-414-4144.)

JUERGEN TELLER

Though his appetite for vulgarity is likely to be more voracious than his viewers', Teller really lays it on this time, exhibiting more than eighty color photographs in vitrines and on the wall. The vitrine pictures—nudes, portraits, and shrugged-off social studies—were made on a visit to Ukraine, where Teller's cold, glossy style rubbed up against a nastier, more pointedly satirical approach that recalls Boris Mikhailov. Most of the other photos come from editorial assignments or Marc Jacobs ads, including an image of Victoria Beckham in a tiny hat that makes her look more foolish than anyone else here. Through March 15. (Lehmann Maupin, 540 W. 26th St. 212-255-2923.)

LUC TUYMANS

The Belgian painter is expected to produce searing political commentary, thanks to the success of past works about colonialism in the Congo and about the Holocaust. This time, Tuymans takes on the most revered and reviled of American institutions: the Walt Disney Company. But while he handled the epic subject of European oppression and genocide with an almost impossibly deft touch, he falls short here. The problem is, he's up against one of the most powerful image manufacturers and disseminators in history. Tuymans wisely sidesteps the sacred Mickey, but his muted, impressionistic paintings of Disneyland and Epcot Center feel wan and lacklustre. Through March 22. (Zwirner, 533 W. 19th St. 212-727-2070.)

JUAN USLÉ

Uslé is a city painter (he moved to New York from Spain in 1987), and his abstractions recall high-rise windows, streets, and overpasses. Thin washes of color are laid on like glazes, accreting into blocks, bands, and stripes; dry pigments vivify what might otherwise be unremarkable patterns. In almost every painting, a single detail undercuts the regimented order of the whole—a curving sliver of acid orange, a stripe that slips the ranks of its neighbors and kinks into a curlicue. If Uslé's approach seems stretched a bit thin, his reliably exquisite effects—like the thin veils of jewel-tone pigment combed into agatelike patterns in "La Cámara Oculta"—redeem it. Through March 15. (Cheim & Read, 547 W. 25th St. 212-242-7727.)

CARRIE MAE WEEMS

Weems, an artist who uses photography and video to delve deep into issues of African-American history and identity, is the subject of a museum-style survey that works both as introduction to and refresher course in one of the more remarkable careers in art. In a red-tinted series that appropriates early anthropological images, she questions photography's role in defining black subjects. Weems herself appears in a grid of black-and-white pictures staged around a dining-room table, skirting domestic melodrama in linked vignettes about a woman in and out of love. The most recent images find the artist as a stranger in a strange land, wandering through Rome like a ghost or an avenging angel. Through March 8. (Shainman, 513 W. 20th St. 212-645-1701.)

BRUCE YONEMOTO

Yonemoto's project sounds almost insultingly simple-minded: dress handsome young Asian-American men in Hollywood Civil War costumes and photograph them in old-fashioned studio settings with swagged curtains, fluted columns, and patterned floors. His results, in crisp, cool color, are as elegant as they are provocative. Yonemoto suggests not just that all portraiture is role-playing, but that all roles are fluid and available. Posing as soldiers from the Union and the Confederacy, his models reclaim roles in American history that Chinese immigrants actually played, while turning war into costume drama—one more vainglorious reënactment. Through March 15. (Gray, 526 W. 26th St. 212-399-2636.)

Short List

NAYLAND BLAKE: Marks, 523 W. 24th St. 212-243-0200. Through March 8. **BRIAN FINKE:** ClampArt, 521-531 W. 25th St. 646-230-0020. Through March 22. **BRUCE NAUMAN:** Sperone Westwater, 415 W. 13th St. 212-999-7337. Through March 29. **ADRIAN PIPER:** Dee, 545 W. 20th St. 212-924-7545. Through April 19. **SETH PRICE:** Petzel, 537 W. 22nd St. 212-680-9467. Through March 8. **MICHAL ROVNER:** PaceWildenstein, 545 W. 22nd St. 212-989-4263. Through March 15. **DAN WALSH:** Cooper, 534 W. 24th St. 212-255-1105. Through March 29. **"MALE":** White Columns, 320 W. 13th St. 212-924-4212. Through March 30. **"THE VISION AND ART OF SHINJO ITO":** Milk Gallery, 450 W. 15th St. 212-645-2797. Through March 30.

GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

SILVIA BÄCHLI

The Swiss artist has shown widely in Europe since the nineteen-eighties but is little known here. That may change with this small and stylish show of works on paper in gouache, ink, and crayon, which stake out a territory between painting and drawing. Bächli's severe grisaille palette offsets

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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
NEW TRADITION

Outré experiments in dance generally survive only in the history books. Reviewers constantly refer to Judson Dance Theatre, the rule-bashing collective of the nineteen-sixties, as the cradle of contemporary choreography, but where,

today, can we see the often dance-less dances with which the Judsonites thumbed their noses at the world of Martha Graham? At P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, this weekend. On Saturday, the choreographer Sally Silvers will mount a program of early pieces by Yvonne Rainer, one of Judson's chief insurrectionists. On view will be the famous "Trio A," from 1966, performed live. After that we'll see a film of Rainer doing it in 1978. Also included will be the 1962 piece "Three Seascapes," in which Rainer had a screaming fit in a pile of white tulle and a black overcoat. That show is at 2. If you go, stay for the program of Silvers's own choreography, at 4. Silvers really is an heir of the Judsonites, and her work is as funny and unsettling as theirs reportedly was. The beloved choreographers Pooh Kaye and Mark Dendy—"two of my favorite partners in improvisational crime," Silvers calls them—will join her onstage.

—*Joan Acocella*

her washy, brushy touch; a preoccupation with abstract line effloresces occasionally into figurative elements (a pair of eyes or stockinged legs). The oppositions hold a tendency toward wispy girlishness in check. Through March 22. (Freeman, 560 Broadway, at Prince St. 212-966-5154.)

KLARA LIDEN
A narrow passageway leads to a dimly lit chamber with a leather sofa. It looks perfect for a meditative moment or a makeout session—but what is that noise coming from the ceiling? Liden's white cube within a cube, constructed for this show, includes, unseen to the viewer, an entryway for pigeons and food to lure them in. Lurking in their own space behind and above the little room, they provide a subtle but uncanny soundtrack of scratching, pecking, and shuffling. Depending on your mood, you might find it soothing (a phenomenological reminder of a world outside our own) or infernal (like an audio outtake from "The Birds"). Through March 9. (Spaulings, 165 East Broadway. 212-477-5006.)

AGNES MARTIN
Blanket adulation can ultimately do more harm than good to an artist's reputation, so it seems fair to observe that some things in this small survey of Martin's works on paper (dating from 1960 through her last-known drawing, made in 2004) are better than others. There isn't a dud, however, in the bunch. Within her famously minimal parameters of grids, dots, and earth- or sky-toned washes, she seems to have been incapable of making an uninteresting mark, and many of the works—most about the size of an album cover—are breathtaking. Through March 15. (Blum, 99 Wooster St. 212-343-0441.)

"DIEBENKORN IN NEW MEXICO"
In 1950, Richard Diebenkorn went to the University of New Mexico on the G.I. Bill, drawn to the high, flat light of Albuquerque. He stayed for two years, painting in a quonset hut, and, judging by the forty-some works in oil, gouache, sumi ink, and watercolor here, his stay was transformative. The planar clarity of the signature "Ocean Park" series (1967-78) hasn't fully crystallized, and one senses traces of apprenticeship to, say, Kline or de Kooning. But the color is rosy, sandy—Western—and the young lion (Diebenkorn was twenty-eight) is busy moving past New York School abstraction into an idiom of his own. Through April 5. (Grey Art Gallery, 100 Washington Square East, 212-998-6780.)

DANCE

PAUL TAYLOR DANCE COMPANY
The Taylor season continues, offering more chances to see his recent Mexican-themed companion pieces "De Sueños (Of Dreams)" and "De Sueños Que Se Repiten (Of Recurring Dreams)." The revolving repertory also alights on the delicately sad "Equinox" (1983), with its famous solo, the whimsical "Diggity" (1978), with its obstacle course of metal dogs, and last year's affecting "Lines of Loss." (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. March 4-6 and March 11 at 7, March 7 at 8, March 8 at 2 and 8, and March 9 at 3. Through March 16.)

FLAMENCO VIVO CARLOTA SANTANA
Capable if infrequently inspiring, the stalwart troupe soldiers on into its twenty-fifth year. A new version of "Carmen," choreographed by and starring Pilar Andújar, sparks some passion in the normally tame company, fuelled by Calvin Hazen's score, which interlaces flamenco with strands of Bizet. Narrative impact isn't a strong suit, though, and "Estilos Flamencos," the program's other offering, avoids it in favor of a showcase of solos and duets. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. March 4-5 at 7:30, March 6-7 at 8, March 8 at 2 and 8, and March 9 at 2 and 7:30.)

PAM TANOWITZ DANCE
For the past few years, this postmodernist choreographer has been playing with ballet technique—pulled-up bodies, stretched legs, pointe shoes—and the intelligent use of classical music (especially in the Baroque style), creating offkilter movement and surprising imagery. Her "Dream Sequence (No Secrets)," a self-described "love letter to romantic ballets" (think "Giselle"), incorporates solos, duets, and ensemble dancing, navigating between imagery and abstraction. (City Center Studio 5, at 130 W. 56th St. 212-352-3101. March 4-8 at 7:30.)

LEESAAR/THE COMPANY / NETTA YERUSHALMY
Week four of the 92nd Street Y Harkness Dance Festival brings new works by three choreographers whose early dance experience has roots in Israel. "Geisha," by LeeSaar (made up of Saar Harari and Lee Sher), is a trio with a sexy, raw edge that belies an underlying sense of vulnerability. Netta Yerushalmy's "Bilocale—Come Closer Please" is a claustrophobic duet for two women interacting uncomfortably in the heightened intimacy of a confined space. (Ailey Citigroup Theatre, 405 W. 55th St. 212-415-5500. March 5-8 at 8 and March 9 at 2.)

"IN THE TRAIL OF THE GHAWAZEE"
For hundreds of years, the Ghawazee dancers of Egypt have travelled the country performing *raqs sharqi*, or "Eastern dance," more commonly known as belly dancing. Vulgarized in movies and lowly café performances, Eastern dance is going through a revival of sorts, of which the Tunisian-born dancer Leila Haddad is a prime example. At Skirball for her New York début, she brings a program of dances illustrating the origins of *raqs sharqi*, accompanied by a seven-member ensemble of musicians on traditional instruments. (566 LaGuardia Pl. 212-545-7536. March 6-7 at 8.)

JENNIFER WRIGHT COOK / BLUM DANCE THEATRE
Jennifer Wright Cook's "Every Artist Is a Narcissist After All: Bring Back the Boo and Other Short Selected Self-Indulgences" has nearly as many elements as words in its title, including home movies, surveillance video of the audience, a gospel singer, and a solo for Cook as Ophelia. Wendy Blum's "Fully Manicured Raw Spots" takes off from David Lynch's "Blue Velvet" and moves into an absurd tangle of bodies scented by popcorn, garlic, and onions cooked onstage. (St. Mark's In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 212-674-8194. March 6-8 at 8:30.)

TAMANGO'S URBAN TAP
The liquid and charming French-Guianese tap dancer brings his African-diaspora travelling circus to Town Hall. In recent incarnations, he's struck a rare balance between tradition (percussion, dance, and song) and modern technology (electronic manipulation and psychedelic video by Jean de Boysson). His crew for this visit includes the Ivory Coast stilt walker Vado Diomande and his fellow-tappers Roxane Butterfly and Baakari Wilder. (123 W. 43rd St. 212-307-4100. March 7 at 8.)

LEAHY
Children of an Irish-Canadian fiddler and a Cape Breton step dancer, the eight Leahy siblings grew up playing festivals and competitions. Their performances as adults still have the feel of a talent show put on by a gifted family, augmented by marriage. Everyone plays multiple instruments, but it's usually the women who dance, in a tight unison line (one of the ladies taps and fiddles at the same time). The music strays from traditional Celtic ballads and jigs into bland country-pop originals. (Brooklyn Center for the Performing Arts, Brooklyn College. 718-951-4500. March 7 at 8.)

YVONNE RAINER / SALLY SILVERS
As part of "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution," P.S. 1 screens a film of the sixties revolutionary Yvonne Rainer's landmark solo "Trio A" and presents live performances of that and other early pieces with the able help of Pat Catterson, Emily Coates, Patricia Hoffbauer, Keith Sabado, and Sally Silvers. Later in the afternoon, Silvers, an iconoclast in her own right, offers three of her own works, plus "Little Lieutenant," a Weimar-themed film she made with Henry Hills in 1993. (22-25 Jackson Ave., at 46th Ave., Long Island City. 718-784-2084. Rainer: March 8 at 2. Silvers: March 8 at 4.)

DANIELLE SIEGELBAUM

Ermenegildo Zegna

KANSAS CITY BALLET
The ensemble returns to New York for a weeklong celebration of its fiftieth season. On the program is a technical tour de force by Twyla Tharp, "Brahms Paganini." William Whitener, one of the dancers who originally performed this work, in 1980, is now the group's artistic director, and his piece "First Position," set to the music of Glazunov, joins "Hey-Hey, Going to Kansas City," a new work by the veteran modern-dance choreographer Donald McKayle, which pays tribute to that city's jazz scene. (175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. March 11 at 7:30. Through March 16.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA
Praised by some, dismissed by others, the Chicago theatre doyenne Mary Zimmerman's new production of **"Lucia di Lammermoor"** (set in Victorian-era Scotland) returns, after opening the season back in September. Its thrilling singer of the title role, Natalie Dessay, is back, along with the excellent Mariusz Kwiecien and John Relyea. New to the team is Giuseppe Filianoti, as Edgardo; James Levine conducts. (March 5 at 8 and March 8 at 1:30.) ♦ The soprano Ruth Ann Swenson, perhaps not the most magnetic singer in the world but still a house favorite, leads the cast of **"La Traviata"** along with her fellow-Americans Matthew Polenzani (as Alfredo) and Dwayne Croft (as Germont); the dependable Marco Armiliato is in the pit. (March 6 at 8.) ♦ In taking up the title role of Benjamin Britten's **"Peter Grimes"** at the Met, the tenor Anthony Dean Griffey joins a glorious tradition that has included the contributions of the heroic Jon Vickers, the elegant Anthony Rolfe Johnson, and the incisive Philip Langridge. Expect Griffey, a singer with a lovely tone and great sensitivity, to bring out the more vulnerable aspects of Britten's tough and troubled fisherman. Patricia Racette and Anthony Michaels-Moore join him at the head of the cast; the fine Scottish maestro Donald Runnicles conducts. (March 7 and March 11 at 8.) ♦ Elijah Moshinsky's production of Verdi's (very) grand opera **"Otello"** almost overpowers the Met's stage with its towering scenery, but when the principals are front and center, the action comes alive as gripping theatre. Johan Botha successfully takes up the challenge of the title role with an intensely lyrical and technically secure portrayal; Renée Fleming, as Desdemona, proves that she can still exploit the resources of her uncommonly expressive voice with elegance and taste. With Carlo Guelfi as Iago; Semyon Bychkov. (March 8 at 8:30.) ♦ Deborah Voigt embarks upon her long-awaited first rendition at the Met of Isolde in **"Tristan und Isolde,"** performing a role she sang to acclaim in Vienna. Ben Heppner takes the other title role, heading a cast that also features Michelle DeYoung (Brangäne) and the great veteran Matti Salminen (King Marke); James Levine. (March 10 at 7.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

NEW YORK CITY OPERA
The city's second professional company, not yet under the command of the Parisian radical Gérard Mortier, opens its spring season with a typical mixture of Italian classics and Baroque novelties. This year it's Henry Purcell's **"King Arthur,"** which, in a new production directed and choreographed by Mark Morris, should be anything but typical: ditching John Dryden's text (Purcell's piece is officially a "semi-opera"—that is, musical decoration for a spoken play), Morris turns the musical numbers into a risqué, over-the-top revue that will show off the talents of the singers (including the house débutants Mhairi Lawson, Iestyn Davies, and Stephen Sanders) and of his Mark Morris Dance Group. The costumes are by Isaac Mizrahi; Jane Glover conducts. (March 5 at 7, March 7 at 8, and March 8-9 at 1:30.) ♦ Mark Lamos's affectionate production of **"Madama Butterfly,"** designed with clean lines and filled with a vast expanse of pastel blue, returns to the house. The cast features Shu-Ying Li, James Valenti, Jennifer Tiller, and Michael Chioldi; Steven Mosteller. (March 6 at 7:30 and March 8 at 8.) (New York State Theatre. 212-721-6500.)

OPERA ORCHESTRA OF NEW YORK
Eve Queler, a trailblazer for women conductors and a champion of unfairly neglected operas, will conduct her hundredth performance as the group's director in a gala concert of arias and ensembles. The starry cast of singers includes Renée Fleming, Aprile Millo, Dolora Zajick, Marcello Giordani, and Stephen Costello; Renata Scotto hosts. (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. March 6 at 8.)

AMATO OPERA: "DON PASQUALE"
When Anthony Amato directed Donizetti's immortal comedy back in the nineteen-fifties, his beloved wife, Sally, sang the role of the crafty vixen Norina. In the midst of the company's sixtieth season, Maestro Amato stages it once more (in English) at his diminutive theatre in the East Village. (319 Bowery, at 2nd St. 212-228-8200. March 8 at 2 and 7:30 and March 9 at 2:30.)

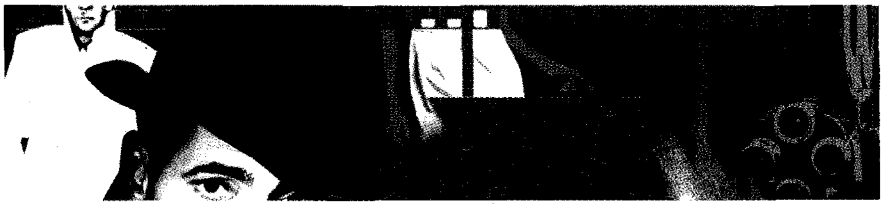
"IN-CITE" ARTS FESTIVAL: "THE MAN WHO MISTOOK HIS WIFE FOR A HAT"
Michael Nyman's one-act opera—based on the book by Oliver Sacks—comes to New York in a production presented by the Boston University College of Music. (Helen Mills Theatre, 137-139 W. 26th St. 212-307-4100. March 10 and March 12 at 7.)

NEW YORK FESTIVAL OF SONG
Some programs in this long-running song-recital series (now in its twentieth year) are adventurous, while others have more than a touch of nostalgia. The latest jumps into contemporary opera with both feet: it's devoted to the world-première performances of two operas by prominent composers for voice, each with a libretto by Mark Campbell—John Musto's "Bastianello" (inspired by an Italian folktale) and William Bolcom's "Lucrezia" (based on Machiavelli's comedy "La Mandragola"). The singers include the mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke and the baritone Patrick Mason; Steven Blier and Michael Barrett are at the piano. (Weill Recital Hall, Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. March 11 and March 13 at 8.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC
New York's flagship orchestra returns from its Asian tour for a program led by its music director designate, Alan Gilbert—an intriguing mix of works by Haydn (the Symphony No. 48, "Maria Theresa"), Beethoven (the Fourth Symphony), and Berio ("Folk Songs," with the radiant soprano Dawn Upshaw). (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-875-5656. March 5-6 at 7:30, March 7 at 2, and March 8 at 8.)

CHOIR OF ST. THOMAS CHURCH
The choir—the finest Anglican ensemble in America—offers the U.S. première of John Tavener's "Mass: Sollemnitas in Conceptione Immaculata Beatae Mariae Virginis" (expected to clock in at a leisurely hundred minutes), which it helped commission. John Scott, the esteemed director of the choir, conducts the Orchestra of St. Luke's.



JOHN RITTER

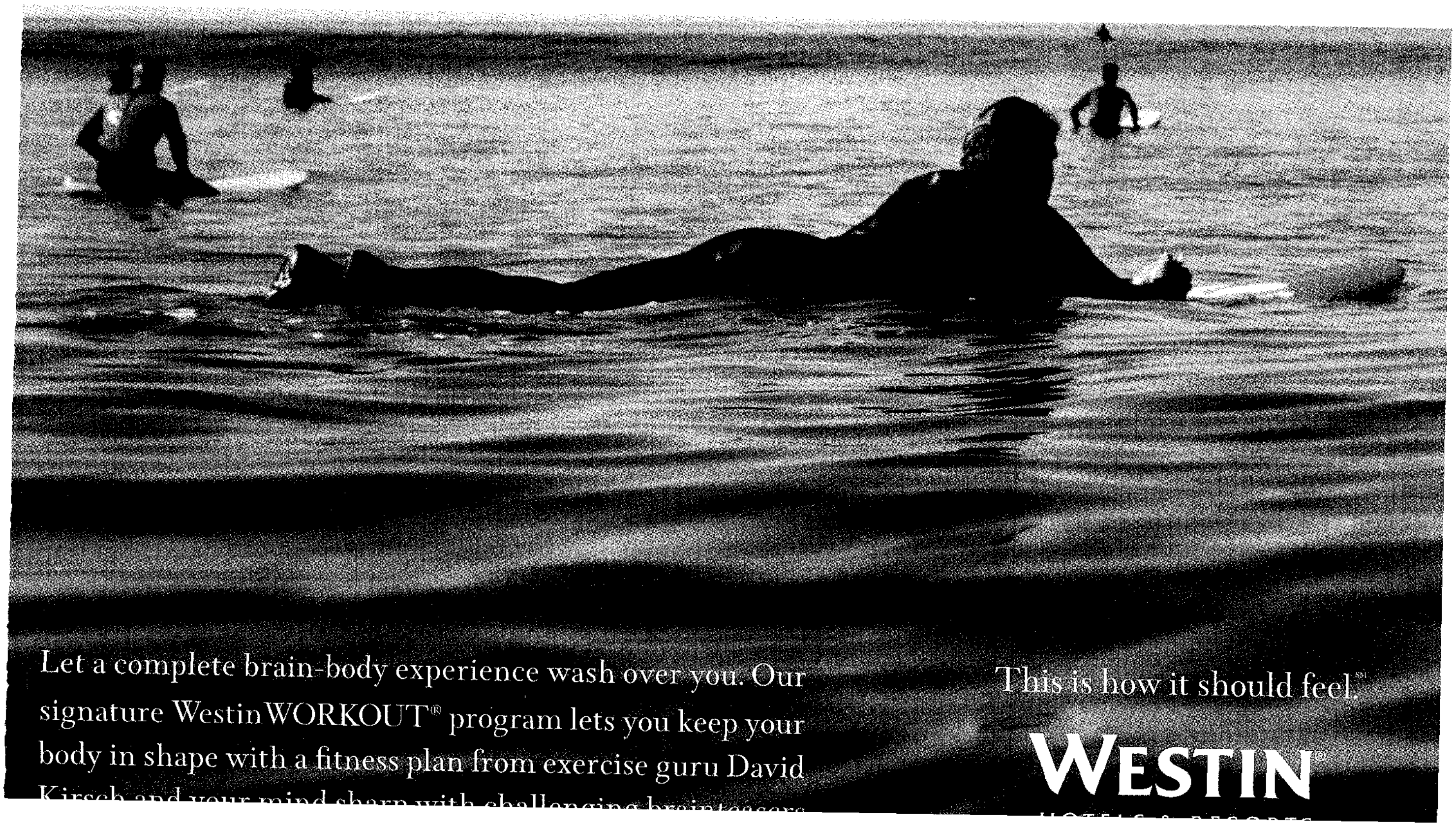
DVD NOTES
THE WRITE STUFF

Each of the four classic comedies in the **"Billy Wilder Film Collection"** (M-G-M) is more than two hours long. Not coincidentally, Wilder co-wrote all of them ("Some Like It Hot," "The Apartment," "Kiss Me, Stupid," and "The Fortune Cookie") with I. A. L. Diamond. Their scripts were complex, inventive, and—most of all—full of intricate, plausible backstories, which tamed Wilder's hectic tabloid instincts and rooted his antic comedy in psychological reality.

"Kiss Me, Stupid," from 1964, turns reality in on itself with the casting of Dean Martin as a big-time singer named Dino who is endowed with many of the real-life performer's most famous attributes, including his coziness with the Rat Pack and his appetite for wine and women. When a detour lands Dino in the small town of Climax, Nevada, a pair of local songwriters—Barney Millsap (Cliff Osmond), a gas-station attendant, and Orville J. Spooner (Ray Walston), a supercilious piano teacher in a Beethoven sweatshirt—plot to sell him their songs by offering him Orville's buxom wife (Felicia Farr), whom the local floozy, Polly the Pistol (Kim Novak), is called in to impersonate. Despite the non-stop ribaldry, the complications are slow to catch fire, but when the plan kicks into gear the results are less funny than they are surprisingly moving, as characters' stifled dreams emerge with a straightforward emotional force. Truffling the script with droll movie references, Wilder and Diamond reveal their true subject: Hollywood itself and its power over hearts and minds. In their view, the business is built on a rotten core of immorality, which is one of the most liberating things it has to offer.

Alain Resnais made his name with "Hiroshima Mon Amour" and "Last Year at Marienbad," faithful settings of scripts by Marguerite Duras and Alain Robbe-Grillet, and most of his films have been adaptations of other writers' work. **"Mélo"** (Kino), from 1986, is based on the popular 1929 play by Henri Bernstein; its title, short for "melodrama," also alludes to the story's musical milieu. Marcel (André Dussollier), a world-famous violin soloist and a hedonistic bachelor, visits the home of his longtime friend Pierre (Pierre Arditi), a Paris concertmaster living in settled suburban comfort with his wife, Romaine (Sabine Azéma)—who promptly seduces Marcel, with tragic results. Resnais emphasizes the story's theatrical origins, with credits resembling a playbill and a red curtain between the acts. An eight-minute take, early in the film, in which Marcel delivers a monologue about the link between artistic triumph and romantic pain, sets the film's tone as well as its subject matter. Resnais's actors exhibit an old-fashioned immobility and self-mastery to go with their florid, letter-perfect diction; the drama both reveals the desperate desire that threatens to break through their refined behavior and suggests the proximity of worldly manners and their passionate deceptions to the disciplined furies of art.

—Richard Brody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BROOKLYN PHILHARMONIC
John Adams's "Dharma at Big Sur," a liquid rhapsody for electric violin and orchestra, is a tribute to both Jack Kerouac's novel "Big Sur" and to the authentically laid-back, trippy tendency in West Coast culture. Leila Josefowicz performs it with Michael Christie and his group in a concert that also features works by Bartók and Takemitsu (the trenchant "Three Film Scores"). (Brooklyn Academy of Music, 30 Lafayette Ave. 718-636-4100. March 8 at 7:30.)

ORCHESTRE SYMPHONIQUE DE MONTRÉAL
Kent Nagano, inheriting the mantle of Charles Dutoit, takes the sumptuous Francophone ensemble to Carnegie Hall for the first time as its new music director. Music both familiar (Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto, with Joshua Bell, and Scriabin's "Poem of Ecstasy") and novel (Debussy's Symphonic Fragments from "The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian" and a new work by Unsuk Chin) is on the program. (212-721-6500. March 8 at 8.)

"Fear(s) of the Dark," an animated film from France, directed by Blutch and others, screens at Walter Reade March 8-9.

ORCHESTRA OF THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT: "MESSIAH"
Handel's limpid "entertainment" on Christian themes isn't just for Christmas anymore. The distinguished London period-instrument ensemble performance, conducted by Laurence Cummings, arrives just ahead of Easter, featuring Lucy Crowe and Andrew Tortoise among the vocal soloists. (Rose Theatre, Broadway at 60th St. 212-721-6500. March 9 at 5.)

TRINITY CHOIR AND REBEL BAROQUE ORCHESTRA
The Baroque specialist Jane Glover, in town for City Opera's "King Arthur," leads the two groups in two of the great Haydn Masses, the "Theresienmesse" and the "Schöpfungsmesse." (Trinity Church, Broadway at Wall St. 866-468-7619. March 11 at 7:30.)

RECITALS

EMANUEL AX
The American pianist, admired for his intelligence and poise, offers music by Beethoven (the Sonatas Nos. 2 and 23, "Appassionata") and Schumann at Carnegie Hall. (212-247-7800. March 5 at 8.) ♦ Ax offers a second recital this week, joining members of the New York Philharmonic in a concert featuring works by Mozart and Schumann (the Piano Quartet). (92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500. March 9 at 3.)

BARGEMUSIC
March 5 and March 7 at 8 and March 9 at 4: The barge hits the ground running this week with an opening concert that features a new work by Behzad Ranjbaran (the fifth in its series of thirtieth-anniversary commissions) that is presented along with works by Beethoven and Mozart (the Flute Quartet No. 1 in D Major and the Divertimento for String Trio); the performers include the flutist Julie Scolnik and the violinist Mark Peskanov. ♦ March 8 at 8: The venerable Fine Arts Quartet teams up with the pianist Christina Ortiz to offer a program of works by Fauré, Franck (the Piano Quintet), and Greg Sandow. ♦ March 11 at 8: Occasionally, small chamber orchestras squeeze into the barge's intimate space. The next is the Orchestra del Teatro Olimpico di Vicenza, which will offer a program of concertos by Telemann, Vivaldi, and Bach. (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. 718-624-2083.)

GABRIELA MONTERO
Montero, a young Venezuelan pianist (and Martha Argerich protégée) as renowned for her improvisations as for her performances of other composers' works, offers a recital that includes Schumann's "Carnaval" as well as her own inspired keyboard musings. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. 212-570-3949. March 6 at 8.)

FIREWORKS ENSEMBLE: "SEX MUSIC"
The irreverent young new-music group throws caution to the wind in an impassioned concert that will feature works by Jacob Druckman ("Valentine," a fantasy for double bass), Frank Zappa, and the irrepressible David Del Tredici, along with rock-tinged arrangements of Debussy's "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun" and Ravel's "Bolero." (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. 212-864-5400. March 7 at 7:30.)

ISABEL BAYRAKDARIAN
At the Met, this Armenian-Canadian soprano is prized for her Mozart performances. At Zankel Hall (accompanied by her husband, Serouj Kradjian), she will sing a selection of songs by Poulenc ("Banalités"), Strauss, Ravel, Jake Heggie, and the Reverend Gomidas—the Sibelius of Armenia. (212-247-7800. March 8 at 7:30.)

BROOKLYN FRIENDS OF CHAMBER MUSIC
The Jupiter String Quartet, members of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's CMS Two program, offers one of those rare concerts in which Beethoven is not the main course but instead is dessert (in this case, the Quartet in F Major, Op. 135); it's preceded by quartets by Mendelssohn, Britten (No. 3, "La Serenissima"), and Kevin Beavers ("Wandlebury Ring"). (Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church, 85 S. Oxford St. March 9 at 3. Tickets at the door.)

STEPHEN HOUGH
The elegant and incisive British pianist performs a refreshingly wide-ranging program of works by Beethoven (the Sonata No. 32 in C Minor), Weber, Webern (the Variations, Op. 27), Chopin, and Liszt. (Zankel Hall. 212-247-7800. March 10 at 7:30.)

WASHINGTON SQUARE CONTEMPORARY MUSIC SOCIETY
In "A Celebration of the Voice," the sopranos Lucy Shelton and Linda Larson (among other singers) perform new works and modern classics by Elliott Carter ("A Mirror on Which to Dwell"), Steven Burke, Tom Cipullo, and others. (Merkin Concert Hall, 129 W. 67th St. 212-501-3330. March 10 at 8.)

MOVIES OPENING

THE BANK JOB
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening March 7. (In wide release.)

BLINDSIGHT
A documentary, directed by Lucy Walker, about six blind students who climb Mt. Everest. Opening March 5. (IFC Center.)

CJ7
Stephen Chow co-directed, with Kitty Zhang Yuqi, and stars in this science-fiction comedy, about a family that receives a strange new pet. Opening March 7. (In wide release.)

COLLEGE ROAD TRIP
A comedy, starring Raven-Symoné as a high-school senior who visits colleges with her domineering father (Martin Lawrence). Directed by Roger Kumble. Opening March 7. (In wide release.)

FROWNLAND
Reviewed below in Now Playing. Opening March 7. (IFC Center.)

GIRLS ROCK!
A documentary about the Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls, in Portland, Oregon, directed by Arne Johnson and Shane King. Opening March 7. (Angelika Film Center.)

MARRIED LIFE
Ira Sachs directed this drama, set in the nineteen-forties, in which a man plots to kill his wife. Starring Pierce Brosnan and Patricia Clarkson. Opening March 7. (Sunshine Cinemas.)

MISS PETTIGREW LIVES FOR A DAY
In this romantic drama, set in 1939, a London governess (Frances McDormand) is hired by an American actress (Amy Adams). Directed by Bharat Nalluri. Opening March 7. (In wide release.)

PARANOID PARK
Reviewed below in Now Playing. Opening March 7. (Angelika Film Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

SNOW ANGELS
Reviewed below in Now Playing. Opening March 7. (Lincoln Plaza Cinemas and Sunshine Cinema.)

10,000 B.C.
Roland Emmerich directed this fantasy, about cavemen who happen upon a lost civilization. Opening March 7. (In wide release.)

NOW PLAYING

THE BAND'S VISIT
Not a musical comedy but a low-key study of thwarted musicians, touched with comic grace. Written and directed by Eran Kolirin, it tells the story of an Egyptian police band that gets lost on a trip to Israel. The travelling musicians wind up in a desert town, dependent on the mercy and generosity of Dina (Ronit Elkabetz), the owner of a local café, who feeds them and finds them places to sleep. Their entire stay requires a delicate maintenance of dig-

nity on both sides; the peace between old enemies is all the funnier for being so frail. Dina, one of the more forceful female characters in recent cinema, enjoys a melancholy half-flirtation with the band's leader (Sasson Gabai) and a more straightforward dalliance with one of his underlings. The music, when it finally strikes up, has an air of quiet celebration, and rightly so. In Arabic, Hebrew, and halting English.—*Anthony Lane* (Reviewed in our issue of 2/11 & 18/08.) (In wide release.)

BE KIND REWIND

A new comedy, just about, from the director Michel Gondry, whose ability to dream up appealing conceits has yet to be matched by the will, or the coherence, to see them through. Jack Black plays a loafer named Jerry, who, after a spasm of electrocution, ends up erasing all the tapes in the local video store; he and a reluctant employee (Mos Def) set about filming homemade replacements for each movie, and, in the process, they attract a minor cult following. Gondry gives himself the chance to snipe and smile at bloated Hollywood productions, then wastes it. We see mere snippets of Jerry's own versions, but that is more than enough; worse still, the story that Gondry weaves around them feels no less shapeless and amateur, and his pretense that an entire present-day community (in Passaic, New Jersey) would stop to laud such ramblings is, at best, nostalgically naïve. With Mia Farrow, who looks genuinely bewildered, and Danny Glover.—*A.L.* (2/25/08) (In wide release.)

CHARLIE BARTLETT

With teen comedies, as with teen-agers themselves, cleverness goes only so far without heart; if this film has one, it's artificial. The protagonist (Anton Yelchin), a rich kid who's been thrown out of prep school and lands in a suburban public high school, shows up in a blazer and tie and wonders why he doesn't fit in. Shades of "Rushmore," of course—they wish. Charlie ingratiates himself with his classmates by becoming their unofficial psychopharmacologist, and comes into conflict with the hip, beleaguered principal (Robert Downey, Jr.) when he starts to date his savvy daughter (Kat Dennings). The director, Jon Poll, never finds the right tone; the comedy careens from cloying to over-the-top, the breakthroughs and the revelations come with no price, and, despite fine, vulnerable performances from Dennings and Downey, the film, with its prefab resolutions, is utterly devoid of life.—*Richard Brody* (In wide release.)

CHICAGO 10

A group of liberated, spontaneous young men (Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, Rennie Davis, Tom Hayden, Bobby Seale, et al.) against the squares and the prissy-voiced elderly (the prosecutor Thomas Foran, Judge Julius Hoffman): that's the way the director Brett Morgen conceives the trial of the Chicago Seven, in March, 1969, when the hippies, yippies, pacifists, and student leftists who organized the protests at the Democratic Convention the previous summer were charged with conspiracy. (Morgen stretched the number to ten by adding Bobby Seale and two defense lawyers.) In other words, he sees the trial in the same romantic-revolutionary terms that the defendants and their followers embraced at the time. The trial itself, which the combined misbehavior of the defendants and the judge turned into a shambles, is re-created in animation, with the actors Mark Ruffalo, Liev Schreiber, Jeffrey Wright, the late Roy Scheider, and others voicing the characters; the courtroom scenes are keyed to actual films of the 1968 protests, an amazingly detailed archival collection of news and personal footage. The animation suits the antic goings on at the trial, and the editing of the archival footage is superb, but Morgen ignores everything else—including the struggles within the Democratic Party and the effect of the protests on the country for years to come. At a moment when a youth movement has gathered behind a candidate capable of seizing power the old-fashioned way, Hoffman and Rubin's nonsense about "revolution" just looks lame.—*David Denby* (In wide release.)

CLOVERFIELD

Think "Godzilla" with A.D.D. Matt Reeves's frantic début, co-produced by J. J. Abrams, starts at a social gathering in New York and ends in devastation, thanks to the arrival of a khaki-colored beast the size of Lincoln Center. The movie's big selling point—and, as it happens, the reason it lurches close to the unwatchable—is that we observe the mayhem exclusively through the lens of a camcorder held by Hud (T. J. Miller) as he and three companions (Michael Stahl-David, Jessica Lucas, and Lizzy Caplan) stagger through the city, trying to save a damsel in distress. Given that the rescuers voluntarily walk through subway tunnels in the dark, in open defiance of every monster-movie convention, you can't help feeling that they deserve every giant poisonous spider that comes their way. Blitzed by the chaos, you may not notice just how much the movie cheats: Hud, for instance, appears to be editing as he goes, and his camera possesses magical powers of endurance. The headlong visuals may have a certain novelty and zip, but the rest of the project—the vacant motivation, the dialogue, the weakness for grinding coincidence—is nothing new.—*A.L.* (1/28/08) (In wide release.)

COLOSSAL YOUTH

Pedro Costa's demanding but rewarding drama, set in Lisbon's dilapidated Cape Verdean ghetto as it undergoes urban renewal, lends epic grandeur to a scruffy milieu. Costa spent fifteen months there, working with the residents to develop their own texts and to play themselves. Ventura, a retired immigrant laborer, circulates among his children—including a recovering drug addict, a beggar, a museum guard, and a mystical idler who is the last holdout in the crumbling slum—as he negotiates with the authorities over his impending move to a modern, antiseptic new apartment. The memory, pain, and longing that fill their static, drama-free lives emerge in their fervent monologues; their declamatory, quasi-operatic performance style raises their anecdotes to the level of legend. Costa's devotion to the spiritual loam of the long-enduring has a Faulknerian charm, as does his tracing of broad tectonic historical movements in the minutiae of ordinary lives and his overarching view of the transition from agrarian to urban, from magical to rational, from subsistence to a toehold on affluence. In Portuguese.—*R.B.* (MOMA; March 7-8.)

THE COUNTERFEITERS

The Austrian winner of the best foreign-film award is the true story of Salomon Smolianoff—known in the movie as Salomon Sorowitsch, or Sally (Karl Markovics), the most skilled counterfeiter in prewar Berlin, and also a bon vivant, ladies' man, cynic, and opportunist. Arrested in 1936, Sally, a Russian-born Jew, is sent to Mauthausen concentration camp, in Germany, where he survives for five years by painting Nazi kitsch. In 1944, he's transferred to another camp, Sachsenhausen, just outside Berlin, and placed at the head of Operation Bernhard, a counterfeiting workshop run by the S.S. and staffed by Jewish prisoners skilled as printers and graphic artists. Sally's unit produces the British pound in bulk, but his perfect design for the dollar is sabotaged by a Communist printer in the group, Adolf Burger (August Diehl), a fiery anti-Nazi who can't bring himself to help the German war effort. The movie is devoted to Sally's genius for survival, his efforts to keep the group together and to prevent the heroic Burger from attaining the martyrdom he appears to long for. Markovics has a hatchet face, aggressive but guarded, even closed off, but with a glint in his eyes. The movie keeps us close to him, and we learn, with increasing admiration, how his mind works. "The Counterfeiters" is a testament to guile. The writer-director, Stefan Ruzowitzky, scored the picture with tangos, which are meant to be Sally's music—seductive, insolent, triumphant.—*D.D.* (3/3/08) (Angelika Film Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

THE DEER HUNTER

A romantic adolescent-boy's view of friendship, with the Vietnam War seen in the Victorian terms of such movies as "Lives of a Bengal Lancer" and "Four Feathers"—as a test of men's courage. This is a remarkably full screen treatment of the mystic bond of male comradeship. Without sharing the film's implicit God-and-country, flag-on-the-door political assumptions, one can see that, even with its pulp components and its superman hero (Robert De Niro, as a Pennsylvania steelworker),

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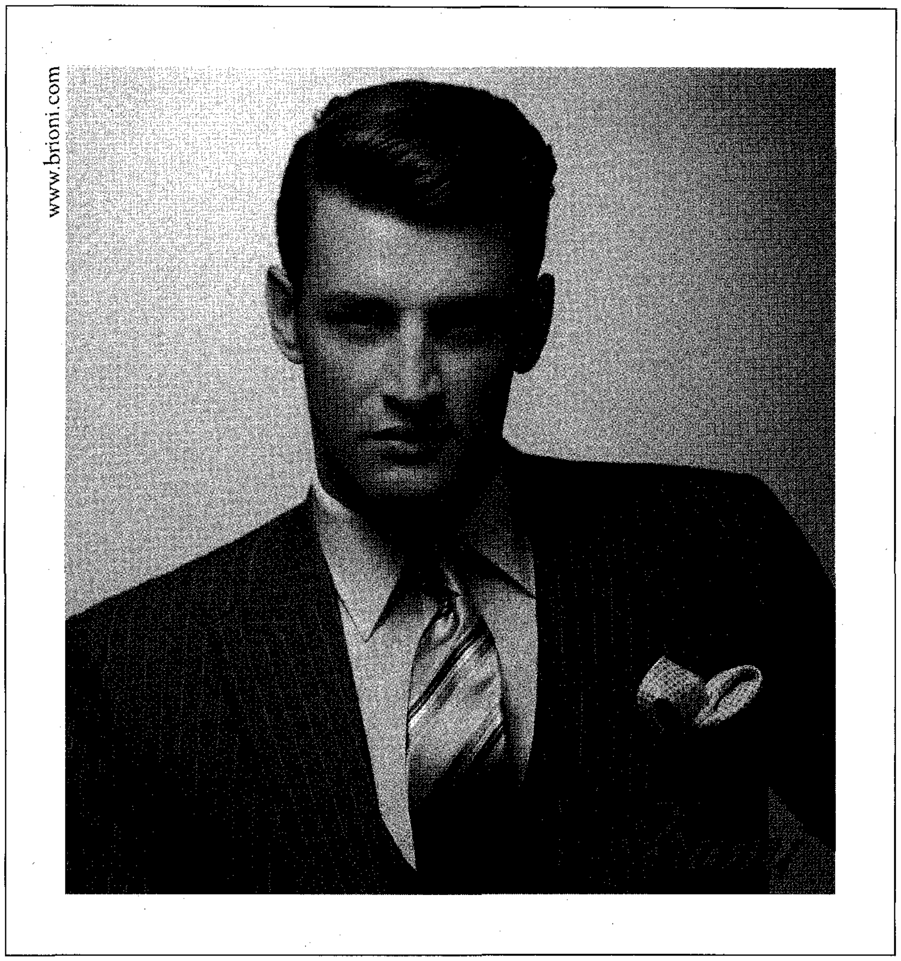
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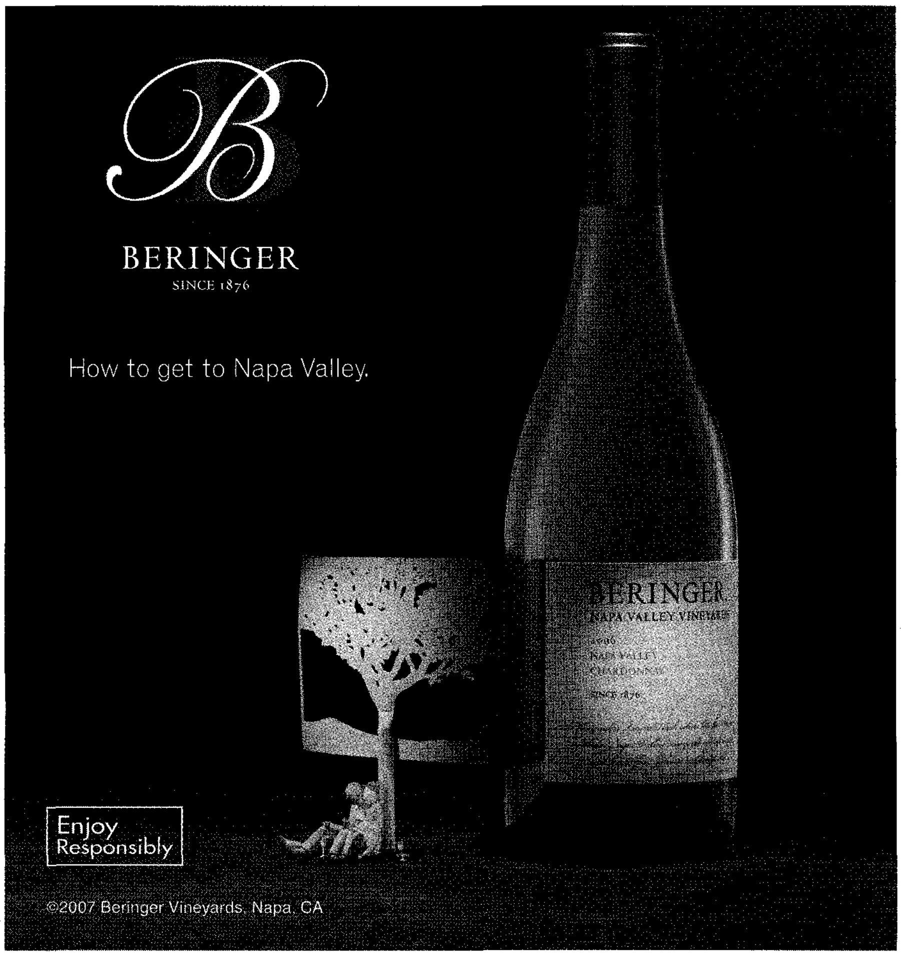

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it is not merely trying to move people by pandering to their prejudices. It is also caught in its own obsessions. And because the director, Michael Cimino, plays them out on such a vast canvas, the film has an inchoate, stirring quality. It has no more moral intelligence than the Clint Eastwood action pictures, yet it's an astonishing piece of work, an uneasy mixture of violent pulp and grandiosity, with an enraptured view of common life—poetry of the commonplace. Released in 1978.—*Pauline Kael* (Thalia Theatre; March 9.)

DEFINITELY, MAYBE

The mild-eyed actor Ryan Reynolds is perhaps too recessive for starring roles in the movies. In this romantic comedy, he plays a young man who can't decide which of three women he wants. His character, Will Hayes, is supposed to be a little lost, but the performance itself is tentative. A big, strong-looking guy, Reynolds doesn't know what to do with his body. Yet "Definitely, Maybe," which was written and directed by Adam Brooks, has charm and spirit. The movie is set in Manhattan during Bill Clinton's first Presidential campaign and the years that followed, when the hero's ambitions and romantic mishaps are plotted against the President's troubles with women and the disillusion of the later Clinton period. Will shapes the tale himself, describing his romantic life to his smart little daughter (Abigail Breslin), at her insistence, but changing the names, so she can't tell which of his three girlfriends will turn out to be her mother. Elizabeth Banks, a slender blonde, plays a Midwesterner with a sense of honor so highly developed she argues herself out of happiness; Isla Fisher, short, with thick auburn hair, is a changeable free spirit who keeps Will—and maybe herself—off balance with a teasing perversity; and Rachel Weisz, in her best movie work to date, is smart, flirtatious, and stunningly untrustworthy as a very ambitious journalist.—*D.D.* (3/3/08) (In wide release.)

THE DUCHESS OF LANGEAIS

Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. (IFC Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

4 MONTHS, 3 WEEKS AND 2 DAYS

There may be filmgoers who still harbor a footling prejudice against tales of Romanian abortion; in which case, here is the way to trounce them. Cristian Mungiu's forbidding drama, the winner of the Palme d'Or at last year's Cannes Film Festival, is set in Bucharest in 1987. Anamaria Marinca stars as Otilia, a young student trying to help a friend and finding herself thwarted, at every turn, by a jaded and hostile world. Her roommate, the hapless Gabita (Laura Vasiliu), wants to be rid of the baby she is carrying; abortion, however, is illegal, and thus, like almost everything in the city, is subject to the vagaries (and the perils) of the black market. So much about this story could have grown gruesome and sensational; instead, even the central deed—performed by the foul-hearted Mr. Bebe (Vlad Ivanov)—is filmed with unerring control. As for Marinca, she draws us ever nearer with her balance of composure and exasperation; how come the Academy took no notice of this actress? In truth, what Mungiu has made is not an abortion picture; it is a study of a system too exhausted to handle love and death. In Romanian.—*A.L.* (1/28/08) (IFC Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

FROWNLAND

This amazingly accomplished first feature by Ronald Bronstein, made with a crew of four for seemingly little more than the cost of film stock, throbs with the energy and vision that independent filmmaking is all about. The story concerns the struggles of a nearly aphasic, socially challenged, yet smart, painfully self-aware, and desperately lonely young man to get through his days and nights. Keith (Dore Mann) is the odd man out in the crew of chirpy losers with whom he works selling coupon books door to door; he has a woman friend, Laura (Mary Wall, Bronstein's wife), who is even more tormented and self-destructive than he is, and an irresponsible roommate whose own travails end in ruin. Bronstein specializes in moments of embarrassment and minor emotional bruises which blend pain with gentle, witty humor. With a sharp eye for telling details, he avoids satire and bathos and creates characters of a rare complexity, which his incisive yet passionate visual style (with its rare attention to light and its absence) realizes empathetically. If there's any justice, Mann, whom Bronstein found working in a supermarket, will get an award for his transfixing performance; his clenched jaws, squinting eyes, and stifled speech avoid all stereotypes as he brings the character to life from within.—*R.B.* (IFC Center.)

HUMAN RESOURCES

For all those moviegoers panting for more films about restrictive working practices in the European economy, this début feature from the French director Laurent Cantet is a must. Jalil Lespert plays Franck, an ambitious young student who comes home from Paris to spend time at the local steel-pressing plant. His father (Jean-Claude Vallot), who looks like a cowardly walrus, has worked on the factory floor for decades. His bright, inexperienced son goes straight into the personnel department, where the issue is one of restructuring the labor force. We all know what that means. The clash between innocence and experience can be seen coming a mile off, but that doesn't diminish the patient, doomy force of the plot, or Cantet's skill in digging drama out of such intractable material. The inevitable showdown between father and son is like a blow to the heart, and the movie ends in a sort of bewildered daze. Apart from Lespert, none of the performers are professionals; they are proper workers, and it shows. In French. Released in 2000.—*A.L.* (MOMA; March 5.)

IN BRUGES

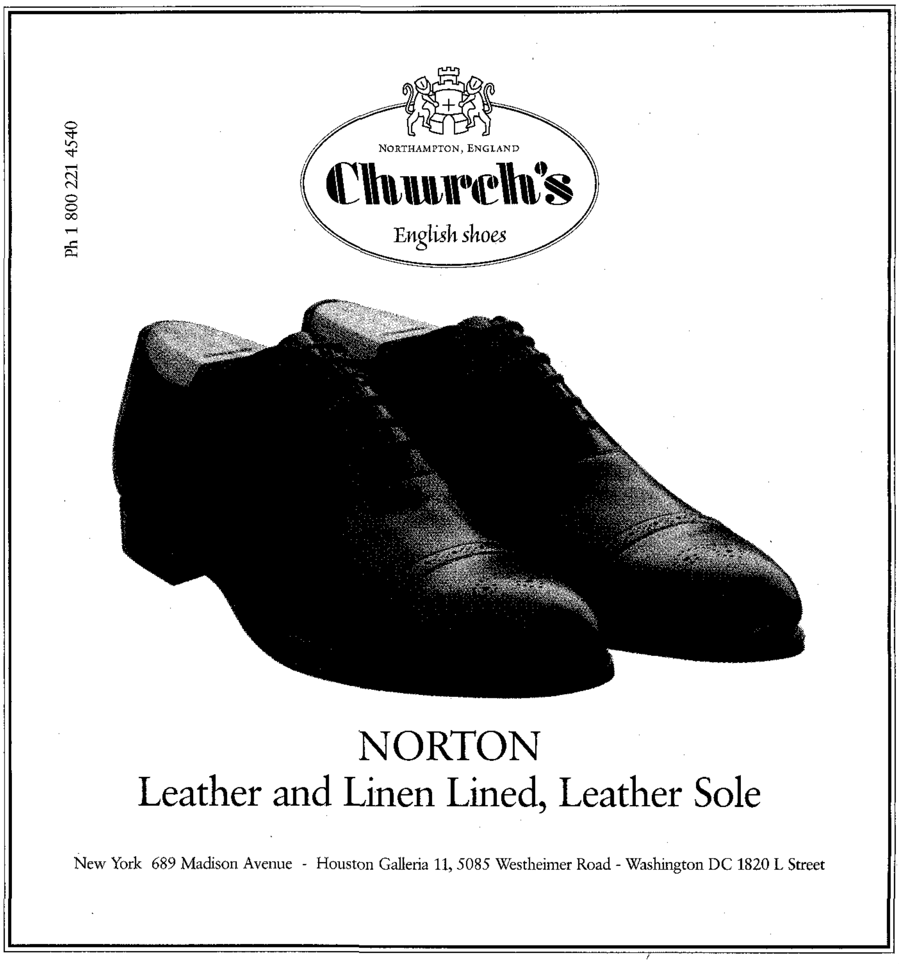
A rare misfire from the Irish playwright Martin McDonagh, whose short film "Six Shooter" won him an Oscar in 2006. His first full-length movie finds a couple of Irish assassins, Ken (Brendan Gleeson) and Ray (Colin Farrell), hiding out in Bruges, Belgium: hardly an obvious refuge for murderers, although McDonagh could have done more with the sinister peace in which even the prettiest canal city can be enfolded. There is something to savor in the early scenes, as the jovial, cultivated Ken squares off against his more impatient sidekick, and their backchat hits an appealing rhythm. Halfway through, however, the film subsides into a mess, exchanging patter for the less amusing spectacle of bullet wounds and bursting heads. If McDonagh wanted to prove himself more than a wordsmith, this was not the way to go about it. With Ralph Fiennes as the men's employer, the most foulmouthed of the three.—*A.L.* (2/11 & 18/08) (In wide release.)

JUMPER

Doug Liman, who made his name with "Swingers"—low on budget, high on talk—has arrived, a dozen years later, at the opposite. His new movie, though full of galloping special effects, is numb and dumb on the issue of human interaction. After a near-death experience, David Rice (Hayden Christensen) finds himself blessed with the gift of teleportation; he can spirit his body from one place to another, anywhere in the world. He does this involuntarily at first, then at will, though we are not told what caused the change. He can enter a bank, grab a sack of cash, and beam back to his apartment. He can take an old girlfriend (Rachel Bilson) to Rome for the day, without any clear idea of what to do there. The only glitch is the presence of Roland (Samuel L. Jackson), one of the Paladins—a group dedicated to finding and neutralizing the Jumpers. (Again, we never learn why.) The movie, smartly set up, soon dribbles away; Jamie Bell lends it some energy, in the role of a twitchy fellow-Jumper, but the cameo handed to Diane Lane (as the hero's mother) is an insult. Who could watch this farrago and still maintain that travel broadens the mind?—*A.L.* (2/25/08) (In wide release.)

NIGHT TRAIN TO MUNICH

A spruce anti-Nazi thriller, set on the eve of the Second World War. It's an unofficial follow-up to Hitchcock's "The Lady Vanishes," with the same spirited leading lady (Margaret Lockwood), the same farcically unflappable old-school Englishmen (Basil Radford and Naunton Wayne), and the same clever screenwriters (Sidney Gilliatt and Frank Launder). Rex Harrison plays a British agent who poses as a German officer in order to rescue Lockwood and her father (James Harcourt)—a Czech scientist with a crucial for-



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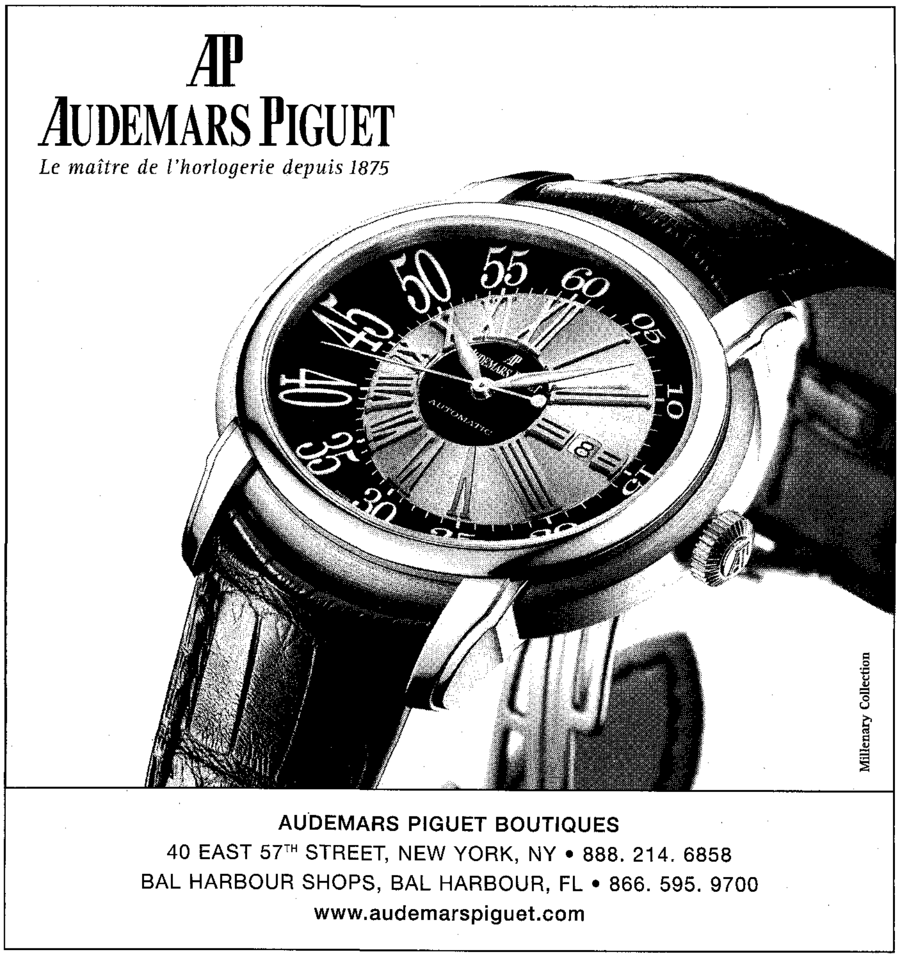

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mula for armor plating—from the Gestapo. Suaveness becomes the Allies' secret weapon when Harrison deploys his rakish charm; the comedy and suspense mesh under Carol Reed's confident direction. With Paul Henreid as Harrison's rival. Released in 1940.—*Michael Sragow* (MOMA; March 5 and March 10.)

THE ORPHANAGE

A skillful and destabilizing début from the young Spanish director Juan Antonio Bayona, in collaboration with the screenwriter Sergio G. Sánchez and the producer Guillermo del Toro (whose own films, notably "The Devil's Backbone," are a looming influence here). A happy couple, Laura (Belén Rueda) and Carlos (Fernando Cayo), buy the old orphanage where Laura herself was raised, and plan to reopen it as a home for disabled children. They have a son of their own, who appears to befriend the long-gone inhabitants of the place, as if communing with ghosts. When he disappears, a professional medium (Geraldine Chaplin) is brought in to help with the search; the staging of her séance, under green night-vision light, is designed to stretch and snap the nerves of the hardiest viewer. The movie, however, is more than the sum of its shocks, ripening into a detailed study of childhood anxiety and the extremes of maternal love. In Spanish.—*A.L.* (1/14/08) (In wide release.)

PARANOID PARK

Gus Van Sant, the director of "My Own Private Idaho" and "Elephant" (as well as many other films), back in dreamy teen-beauty mode. Alex (Gabe Nevins), a Portland boy from a broken home, spends his life at a local skateboard park along with dozens of other disaffected kids. Alex accidentally kills a security guard but tells no one. Christopher Doyle, who shot the movie (in part with an 8-mm. camera), swings back and forth within the curved cement tunnels and declivities of the park along with the kids, and the movie reaches a kind of nirvana of affectlessness. The moral questions are hardly addressed, much less resolved, and when the camera settles on Gabe Nevins's angel face, we learn nothing of what's in the boy's head. Van Sant, adapting a novel by Blake Nelson, made the movie largely with non-actors, many of them found on MySpace.—*D.D.* (Angelika Film Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

SNOW ANGELS

One can be entirely in favor of the glum splendor of winter landscapes and the dramatization of failed marriages, adultery, forlorn kids, and out-of-tune school marching bands and still find this movie a bit too dreary to sit through. Among the freezing participants are Kate Beckinsale, who is excellent as a distraught mother who can't get away from her wreck of a husband (Sam Rockwell), Nicky Katt as a hapless ladies' man, Amy Sedaris as his game wife, and Michael Angarano and Olivia Thirlby as teen-agers who find each other, or at least warmth, beneath the covers. The director, David Gordon Green, adapted the novel by Stewart O'Nan. Shot in Halifax and elsewhere in Nova Scotia.—*D.D.*(Lincoln Plaza Cinemas and Sunshine Cinema.)

STILL LIFE

A metaphysical ghost-town movie from the Chinese film poet Jia Zhang-ke. The enormous Three Gorges hydroelectric project, damming the Yangtze River, has flooded some of the towns and cities upstream, including Fengjie, where abandoned buildings rot in the summer heat; the only people remaining are the elderly and groups of workmen slowly demolishing the remaining structures with hand tools. The movie chronicles the adventures of two outsiders looking for their mates, who have been working on the project, but the story is intermittent at best. Instead, the movie is a flawless realization of limbo, in which the past has died and the future has yet to arrive. Despite the desolation, it's a beautiful-looking piece of work. From the high banks, the river and the green mountains on both sides of it extend into the distance in majestic panoply; gray clouds hang over the scene like painted backdrops. Jia, working with the cinematographer Yu Wiklai, is incapable of making an ugly or unresonant image: the air seems moist and

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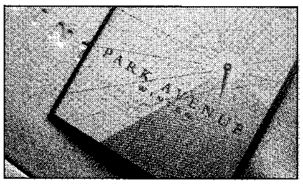
TABLES FOR TWO
PARK AVENUE WINTER



HONORE BROWN

100 E. 63rd St. (212-644-1900)—In recent years, the resolutely sedate Park Avenue Café tried and failed to recruit younger diners with gimmicks like Pay Your Age; last year, it closed. The owners have since remade the place as an ode to the four seasons, with the restaurant's décor, menu, and name changing quarterly. What began as Park Avenue Summer was done over as Park Avenue Autumn; now we have Park Avenue Winter; soon it will be Spring, and so on. Compounding the loopiness of it all, the décor is said to be inspired not only by the seasons but also by the voyages of Captain James Cook. As the restaurant's Web site puts it, "Winter pays homage in part to Cook's travels in the Antarctic Circle, combined with a classic drawing room aesthetic." Don't bother parsing that too closely; instead, think vases filled with bare branches, chandeliers, and lots and lots of white. The look suggests a fancy restaurant not on the Upper East Side but somewhere else—Narnia, maybe, or Heaven.

Fortunately, the homage to Cook's Antarctic Circle journey doesn't extend to the menu. (When provisions ran low, the captain and his crew dined on penguins. Cook's assessment: "I cannot say they are good eating.") Park Avenue Winter interprets the idea of seasonalism loosely; with its citrus fruits and Florida-stone-crab claws and other food shipped in from warm places, this isn't Blue Hill uptown. Some of the offerings are pleasing and hearty (a paper bag full of chestnut fritters to start, the paradoxical "roast chicken coq au vin," potato latkes). But other dishes, while undeniably tasty (the fluke sashimi with persimmons comes to mind), are the antithesis of hearty. When it's warm outside, you want to eat cold things; when it's cold out, you crave warmth. This place, with its "Coldwater Raw Bar" and special "Winter White" menu of all-white food, has the equation backward.

Undeterred by all the changes, many of the old Park Avenue Café patrons keep coming, lending the place a neighborhood vibe almost in spite of itself. (There is lots of it's-such-a-small-world chatter in the background: "You see that woman with the crazy hair—I saw her in another restaurant last week" and "So nice to see you twice in one day" and "We're all at the Regency, so we all have the same umbrellas!") The executive pastry chef, Richard Leach, actually gets winter, so once dinner has been cleared, there's an incentive to linger. Pears poached in red wine, warm gingerbread, pecan biscotti served with hot buttered rum—these are balms fit for dreary weather. (Open daily for lunch and dinner. Entrées $26-$48.)

—*Kate Julian*

palpable, and even the thick, rusted pipes of derelict factories appear to breathe. In Mandarin.—*D.D.* (1/21/08) (Cinema Village.)

UNFAITHFULLY YOURS
One of the most sophisticated slapstick comedies ever made, this classic, written and directed by Preston Sturges, got terrible reviews and failed at the box office. The hero, a symphony conductor (a parody of Sir Thomas Beecham), is played by Rex Harrison, who is at one of his comic peaks. During a concert, the conductor, convinced that his wife (Linda Darnell) has been unfaithful to him, fantasizes how he will handle the situation in three different ways, according to the style of the music on the program—Rossini's Overture to "Semiramide," the "Pilgrim's Chorus" from Wagner's "Tannhäuser," and Tchaikovsky's "Francesca da Rimini." After the concert, he tries to carry them out, scrambling them hopelessly. There are so many great lines and situations in this 1948 movie that writers and directors have been stealing from it for years, just as they've been stealing from Sturges's other work, but no one has ever come close to the wildman deviltry of his best comedies.—*P.K.* (MOMA; March 7.)

U2 3D
One of the world's greatest rock bands gets the full 3-D treatment in this fantastic concert film, directed by Catherine Owens and Mark Pellington. Filmed in the course of a week's worth of performances in Buenos Aires during the band's 2006 "Vertigo" tour, the movie features more than a dozen tunes, performed to perfection and infused with the overt, loving excitement of a band that lives for musical transcendence. Owens and Pellington's use of multiple cameras, particularly those placed among the adoring crowds, brings a joyous human element to the show, and the concert has been distilled to a heady eighty-five minutes that showcases some of the greatest work the band has ever done. It may be the best concert film since "Stop Making Sense."—*Bruce Diones* (In wide release.)

VANTAGE POINT
Zero art, but a triumph of engineering. An attempted assassination of the President of the United States in Spain is seen from the point of view of six participants in the events, one version after another, with each adding a little more information. The many views of the same events have to synch up visually, a feat that can't be easy to pull off, and the sheer hurtling force of so much of the action—people running hard, cars racing down streets—is exciting to watch. Like the ancient philosophers or medieval mystics, we long to perceive the secret and idiosyncratic pattern within chaos, the singular currents running through the tumultuous sea. We are denied this in life, since we can never recall everything in a messy event happening around us, no matter how many times we replay it in our heads; in a brutally efficient way, the writer, Barry Levy, and the director, Pete Travis, have achieved this. With Dennis Quaid as a Secret Service agent, William Hurt as the President, Forest Whitaker as a bystander with a camera, and various swarthy actors as (presumably) Islamic terrorists.—*D.D.* (3/3/08) (In wide release.)

Also Playing

CHOP SHOP: Film Forum. **CITY OF MEN:** In wide release. **JAR CITY:** IFC Center. **SEMI-PRO:** In wide release. **THE SIGNAL:** In wide release.

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES
32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (212-505-5181)—Special screenings. March 6 at 7 and 8:30: "On the Bowery" (1956, Lionel Rogosin). ♦ March 6 at 7:30: Films by Mike and George Kuchar, including "Tales of the Bronx" (1970). ♦ March 7 at 7 and 9 and March 8-9 at 5, 7, and 9: "Myra Breckenridge" (1970, Michael Sarne). ♦ "Essential Cinema." March 8 at 4:30: "Ordet" (1955, Carl Theodor Dreyer; in Danish, no subtitles). ♦ March 9 at 7:30: "Strike" (1925, Sergei Eisenstein; silent, with Russian intertitles).

ASIA SOCIETY
725 Park Ave., at 70th St. (212-517-2742)—Through April 17: "Gamblers, Gangsters and Other Anti-Heroes," Japanese yakuza films. March 6 at 7: "A Tale of Two Yakuza" (1968, Tomu Uchida; in Japanese).

BAM ROSE CINEMAS
30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-636-4100)—Through March 30: The films of Manoel de Oliveira. Except where noted, all films are in Portuguese. March 7 at 4:30 and 9:30: "Aniki Bóbó" (1942). ♦ March 7 at 7: "Christopher Columbus, the Enigma" (2007), followed by a Q. & A. with the director. ♦ March 8 at 6 and 9:30: "The Past and the Present" (1971). ♦ March 9 at 6:50 and 9:15: "Benilde or the Virgin Mother" (1975). ♦ "30 Years of J. Hoberman." March 10 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:30: "Eraserhead" (1977, David Lynch). The 6:50 screening will be introduced by Hoberman. ♦ March 11 at 7: "Naked Lunch" (1991, David Cronenberg) and "Tribulation 99" (1991, Craig Baldwin).

FILM FORUM
W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110)—In revival. March 5 at 1, 2:50, 4:40, 6:30, 8:20, and 10:10 and March 6 at 1, 2:50, 4:40, and 10:30: "Violent Saturday" (1955, Richard Fleischer). ♦ March 7-13 at 1, 2:50, 4:40, 6:30, 8:20, and 10:10: "It Always Rains on Sunday" (1947, Robert Hamer). ♦ Special event. March 5 at 7: "A Face in the Crowd" (1957, Elia Kazan), followed by a conversation with Budd Schulberg and Patricia Neal.

FRENCH INSTITUTE ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE
Florence Gould Hall, 55 E. 59th St. (212-355-6160)—Through March 25: "James Ivory in Paris." March 11 at 12:30 and 7: "Jefferson in Paris" (1995; in English and French). ♦ March 11 at 4 and 9:30: "The Proprietor" (1996; in French).

IFC CENTER
323 Sixth Ave., at W. 3rd St. (212-924-7771)—"Rendez-Vous with French Cinema." All films are in French. March 5 at 7:30: "Trivial" (2007, Sophie Marceau). ♦ March 6 at 7: "Shall We Kiss?" (2007, Emmanuel Mouret). ♦ March 6 at 9:30: "All Is Forgiven" (2007, Mia Hansen-Løve; in French). ♦ "Stranger Than Fiction," a documentary series. March 11 at 8: "The Greening of Southie" (2008, Ian Cheney and Curt Ellis).

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9480)—"Still Moving." March 5 at 1:30, March 8 at 7, and March 10 at 4:30: "All the King's Men" (1949, Robert Rossen). ♦ "The Age of Chevalier." March 5 at 6: "Human Resources" (†). ♦ March 7 at 7 and March 8 at 3: "Colossal Youth" (†). ♦ "Rex Harrison: A Centenary Tribute." March 5 at 6:15 and March 10 at 8:30: "Night Train to Munich" (†). ♦ March 6 at 6: "Major Barbara" (1941, Gabriel Pascal). ♦ March 6 at 8:15: "The Rake's Progress" (1945, Sidney Gilliatt). ♦ March 7 at 6: "The Ghost and Mrs. Muir" (1947, Joseph L. Mankiewicz). ♦ March 7 at 8:15: "Unfaithfully Yours" (†). ♦ March 8 at 2: "Escape" (1948, Mankiewicz). ♦ March 8 at 5:30: "King Richard and the Crusaders" (1954, David Butler). ♦ March 8 at 8: "The Honey Pot" (1966, Mankiewicz). ♦ March 9 at 2 and March 10 at 5: "My Fair Lady" (1964, George Cukor). ♦ The films of Ernie Gehr. March 9 at 5:30: "The Magic Lantern Show" (2008) and "Waterfront Follies," a work in progress (2008).

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART
150 W. 17th St. (212-620-5000, ext. 344)—"Cabaret Cinema." March 7 at 9:30: "Whirlpool" (1949, Otto Preminger), introduced by John Guare.

SUNSHINE CINEMA
143 E. Houston St. (212-330-8182)—"Sunshine@Midnight." March 7-8: "Rear Window" (1954, Alfred Hitchcock).

THALIA THEATRE
Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St (212-864-5400)—"Best Films of 1978." March 9 at 7:30: "The Deer Hunter" (†). ♦ March 11 at 7:30: "Days of Heaven" (Terrence Malick).

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WALTER READE THEATRE
Lincoln Center (212-875-5600)—"Rendez-Vous with French Cinema." All films are in French. March 5 at 1:30: "Ain't Scared" (2007, Audrey Estrougo; in French). ♦ March 5 at 4 and March 9 at 6:15: "The Feelings Factory" (2008, Jean-Marc Moutout). ♦ March 5 at 6:30, March 6 at 3:15, and March 7 at 6:30: "The Grocer's Son" (2007, Eric Guirado). ♦ March 5 at 8:45: "Her Name Is Sabine" (2007, Sandrine Bonnaire). ♦ March 6 at 1, March 8 at 6:30, and March 9 at 3:45: "Those Who Remain" (2007, Anne Le Ny). ♦ March 6 at 8:15 and March 7 at 1:30: "Trivial" (2007, Sophie Marceau). ♦ March 7 at 4, March 8 at 1:30, and March 9 at 8:45: "Shall We Kiss?" (2007, Emmanuel Mouret). ♦ March 7 at 8:45 and March 8 at 4: "All Is Forgiven" (2007, Mia Hansen-Løve). ♦ March 8 at 9 and March 9 at 1:30: "Fear(s) of the Dark" (2008, Blutch, et al.).

READINGS AND TALKS

HOUSING WORKS BOOKSTORE
The illustrator and artist Matt Madden talks with the French graphic novelists Philippe Dupuy and Charles Berberian about their work. (126 Crosby St. 212-334-3324. March 5 at 7.)

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART
The director Julie Taymor joins Sam Wang, an associate professor of neuroscience at Princeton University, and Sandra Aamodt, the editor-in-chief of *Nature Neuroscience*, for a talk about how the brain works and to help celebrate the publication of Aamodt and Wang's new book, "Welcome to Your Brain: Why You Lose Your Car Keys But Never Forget How to Drive and Other Puzzles of Everyday Life." (150 W. 17th St. 212-620-5000, ext. 344. March 10 at 7.)

EDNA O'BRIEN
The Irish writer reads from her work and discusses it with the essayist and radio-show host Leonard Lopate. (LeFrak Concert Hall, the Music Building, Queens College, Flushing. For more information, visit www.qc.edu/readings. March 11 at 7.)

K.G.B. BAR
The foreign correspondent Eric Weiner offers selections from his latest book, "The Geography of Bliss: One Grump's Search for the Happiest Places in the World," and Jennifer 8. Lee, a reporter for the *Times*, reads from her book, "The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese Food." (85 E. 4th St. No tickets necessary. March 11 at 7.)

ABOVE AND BEYOND

"USA MEMORY CHAMPIONSHIP"
The competitors in this annual memorization contest are dubbed "mental athletes," and they are given sequences of playing cards, random words, strings of numbers, and poetry to study, then scored on how well they can recall the information. And, while there are strategies for preparing, don't assume that well-read English majors have any advantage—the poetry used here has never been published. The winner goes on to compete in the World Memory Championship, in Bahrain later this year. (Con Edison Auditorium, 4 Irving Pl., at 14th St. For more information, visit www.usamemorychampionship.com. March 8, from 9 to 5.)

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES
American paintings from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are the current focus of activities at the two rival auction houses. **Sotheby's** (March 6) is offering a group of nine works by the landscape artist, illustrator, and muralist Eric Sloane (who specialized in views of New England and the Southwest), from the collection of a friend of the artist; his evocative depictions—of a covered bridge in New Hampshire, a house in a Connecticut field—summon up a world of silence, cloud formations, stone, and weathered wood. Other artists in the sale include Kenneth Pauling Riley, Guy Wiggins, and William Merritt Chase. (York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.) ♦ **Christie's** sale of American art (March 7) also encompasses drawings and sculpture, a prime example of the latter being a striking Art Deco piece by Boris Lovet-Lorski, "Departing Night," depicting a streamlined, dark-hued male figure seemingly ready to slither off his pedestal. From Robert Riggs, there is "The Brown Bomber," a charcoal-and-pastel drawing of Joe Louis, looming, muscles tensed, over his vanquished opponent, the German pugilist Max Schmeling. (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.) ♦ Last week's schedule included an entire art fair devoted to works on paper; now there's a sale at **Swann** focused on the same category (March 6), featuring works by Whistler, Cadmus, and Cassatt. (104 E. 25th St. 212-254-4710.)

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SEYMOUR CHWAST

A trio of Irish writers at the Tenement Museum.

ON THE HORIZON

MOVIES
LE ROI GEORGES
March 14–17

Had Georges Franju done nothing but help Henri Langlois launch the Cinémathèque Française, in the nineteen-thirties, his immortality would be assured. But he went on to make a handful of hallucinatory films, including the slaughterhouse documentary "Blood of the Beasts" and the horror classic "Eyes Without a Face." These and other rarities are on the program at Anthology Film Archives. (212-505-5181.)

READINGS AND TALKS
GIFT OF THE GAB
March 17

A trio of sterling Irish writers—Colum McCann, Nuala O'Faolain, and Colm Tóibín—visit the Tenement Museum for a St. Patrick's Day reading. (212-982-8420.)

ART
BIG FINISH
March 21–June 15

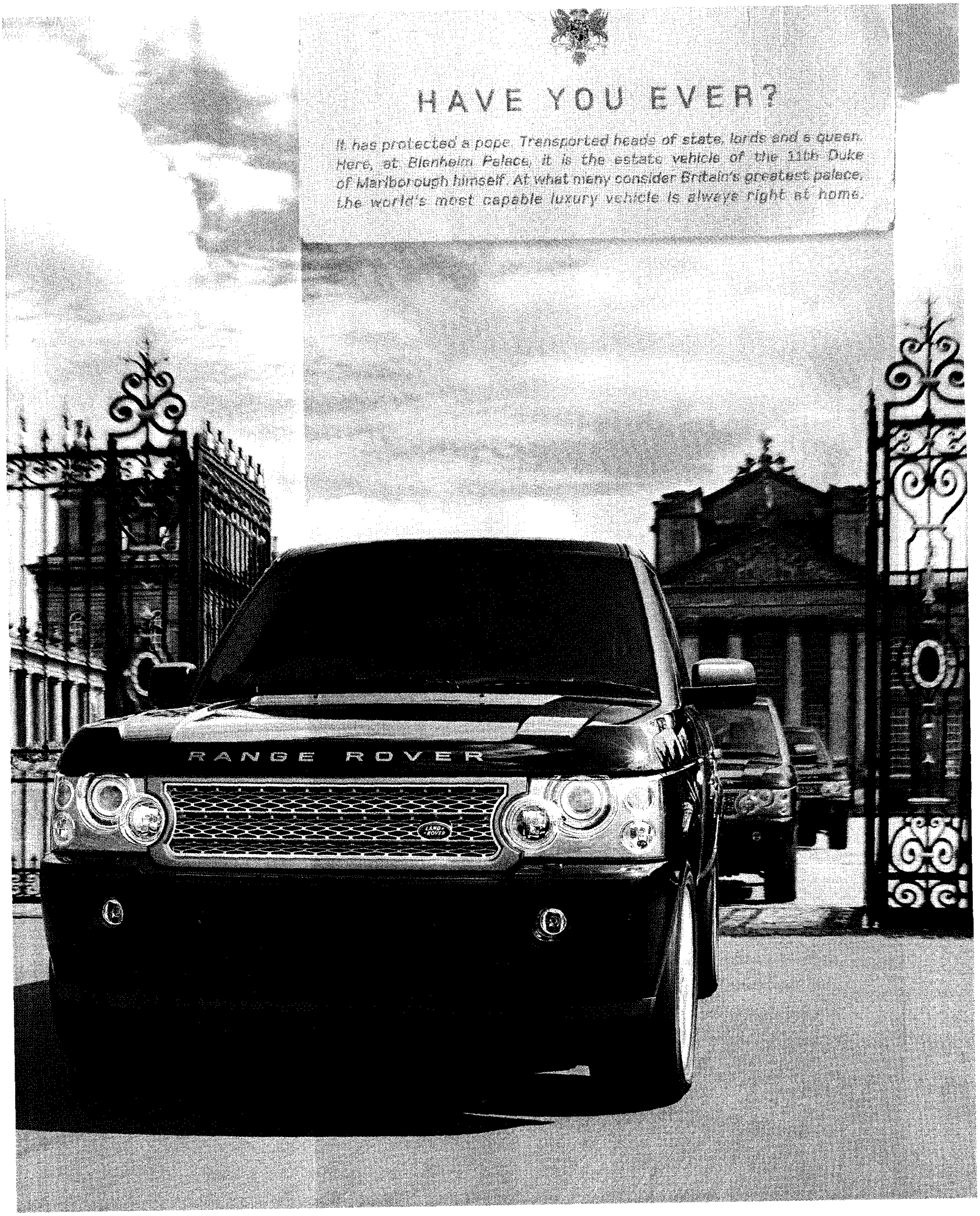
"The Genius of Japanese Lacquer: Masterworks by Shibata Zeshin," at the Japan Society, highlights the work of a legendary craftsman, who transformed his medium in the nineteenth century. In addition to inventing new techniques yielding surfaces that looked like bronze, porcelain, and rosewood, Zeshin liberated lacquer from its traditional surfaces and mastered the art of painting it on paper. (212-752-3015.)

THE THEATRE
WARM RECEPTION
March 25

Harvey Fierstein has collected Tony Awards for "Torch Song Trilogy," "La Cage aux Folles," and "Hairspray." Now he has written and co-stars in the new musical "A Catered Affair," based on the 1956 movie, about a Bronx family planning a wedding. Faith Prince and Tom Wopat also star; John Doyle directs. (212-239-6200.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
RETURN OF THE KING
March 28–29

Thomas Adès, the supremely talented British composer-pianist-conductor who has his own Carnegie Hall "Perspectives" series this season, returns to lead two concerts—one featuring an opera by Gerald Barry, the other of his own music. (212-247-7800.)



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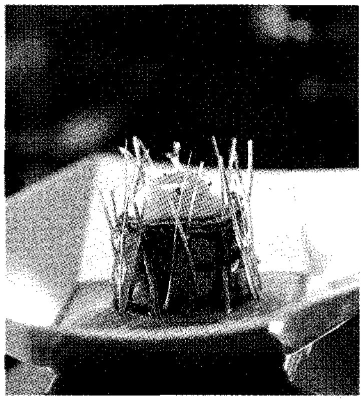
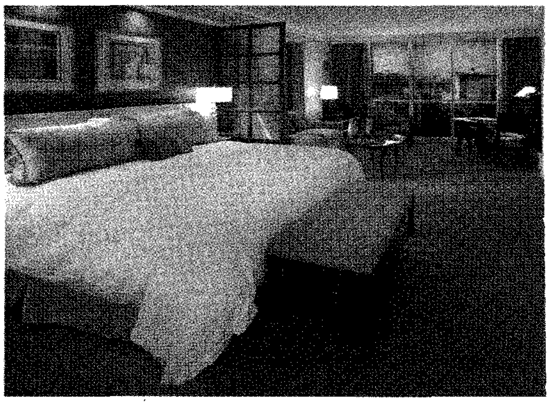
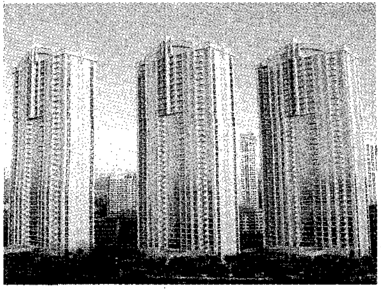




THE SIGNATURE AT MGM GRAND
SUITE LIFE

Travelers who yearn for a "best of all possible worlds" Las Vegas experience find it at The Signature at MGM Grand. A distinctive row of three golden towers a block from the Las Vegas Strip, the hotel contains 576 suites that offer the comforts of a luxurious apartment. Many have balconies overlooking either the Strip or the mountains. The non-gaming Signature at MGM Grand accords a serenity previously unknown to Vegas visitors. Drive through the gated entrance, and a valet whisks away your car. In the intimate lobby, the key card to your private retreat awaits.

Every smoke-free suite is designed to meet the needs of those who visit for pleasure as well as those who come to conduct business. Two-line phones, high-speed Internet access, Wi-Fi, and a lobby business center with computer workstations and other office necessities make it a perfect destination for the business traveler. And the excitement of MGM Grand's "maximum Vegas"—the casino, the gourmet cuisine at award-winning restaurants, exhilarating night life, the indulgent Grand Spa and Cristophe Salon, and the nearly seven-acre Grand Pool complex—are steps away.



The Signature suites' multiple HDTVs, DVD/CD player, and iPod-compatible clock radio make every guest feel like a media mogul. The spacious marble bathrooms are true refuges with a whirlpool tub, flat-screen TV, and June Jacobs amenities favored by spa-goers. Although room service is available around the clock and there's a Starbucks as well as a gourmet deli on the Signature premises, suites are equipped with Sub-Zero, Miele, and Bosch kitchen appliances.

TO DINE...OR TO FEAST?

Using the kitchen in your suite could depend on whether you are inspired or intimidated after dining at one of the sixteen starred restaurants in the newly published *Michelin Las Vegas 2008* guide.

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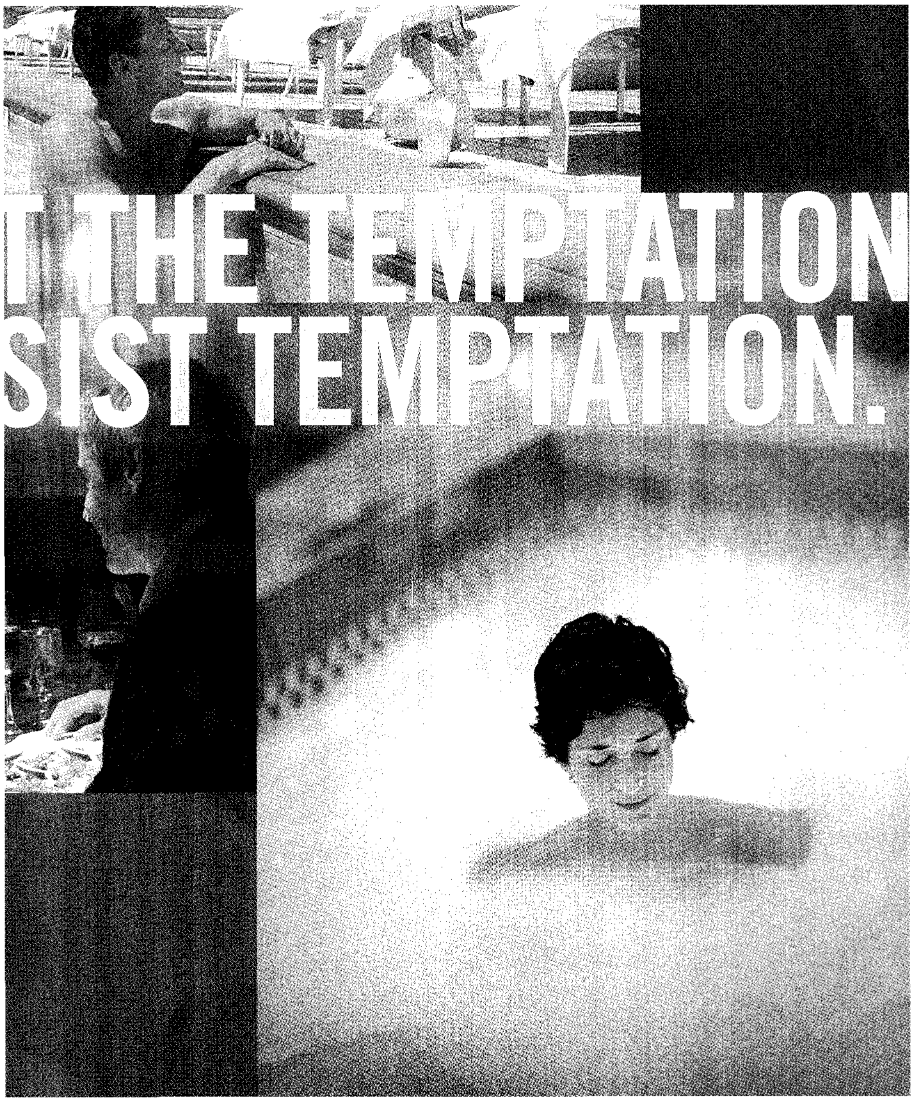
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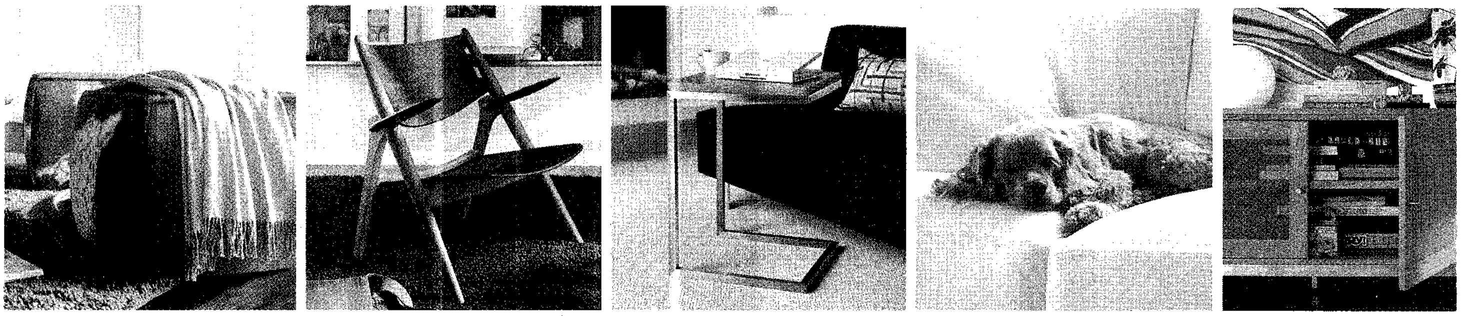

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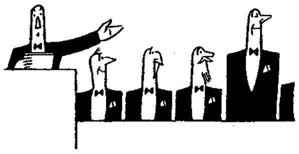
HOME FURNISHINGS

THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

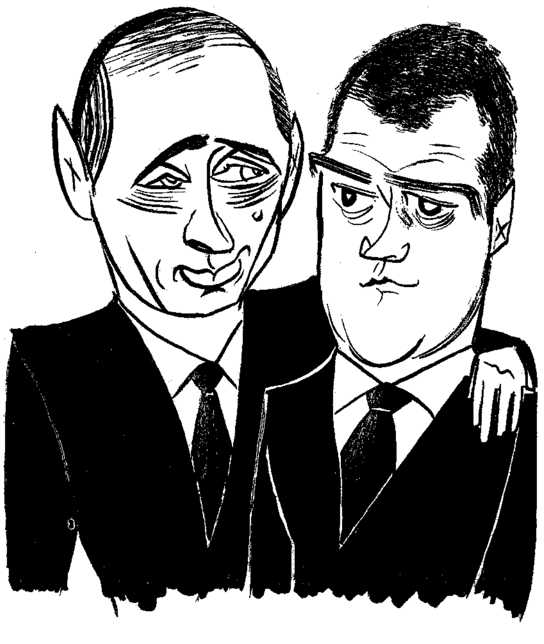
SMOKE ON THE WATER



Alexander II, before liberating the serfs, liberated the smokers. (To indulge his own habit, he lifted the imperial ban on tobacco.) Alexander III played the French horn. Nicholas II was a photography buff. Catherine the Great was a passionate equestrienne. Maybe it has something to do with the vastness of Russia's geography or with the bloody absolutism of its history, but it's always been easier to contemplate a new master of the Kremlin by seizing on homey anecdotes.

Trivia domesticated even the worst Soviet-era résumés. When Leonid Brezhnev died, in 1982, and the K.G.B. chief, Yuri Andropov, became General Secretary of the Communist Party, the Western press did not skip lightly over the new man's role in crushing the Hungarian uprising, in 1956, and the Prague Spring, in 1968, but it also greeted him with bonbons of wishful description. The *Times* reported that Andropov's "intense gaze and donnish demeanor gave him the air of a scholar." According to *Time*, he was a "witty conversationalist," who listened to the song stylings of Miss Peggy Lee. And an article in the Washington *Post's* Outlook section called him "a perfect host," who occasionally invited "leading dissidents to his home for well-lubricated discussions that sometimes extended to the wee hours of the morning."

Now comes Dmitry Anatolyevich Medvedev, the next President of Russia. Five feet four. Forty-two years old. Lawyer. Friend and longtime protégé of Vladimir Putin. Husband (wife: Svetlana). Father (son: Ilya, age eleven). Nickname in the Kremlin: the Grand Vizier. Favorite book as a boy: "The Soviet Encyclopedia." Understands "Olbanian," the term of art for Russian Internet slang. Practices yoga. Swims each morning and evening. Big fan of seventies schlock bands. "I've loved hard rock since my school days," he told an interviewer not long ago. "Today, for example, I can boast that I have the entire collection of Deep Purple." And, if you're still curious, Medvedev keeps an aquarium in his office at the Kremlin. He alone is permitted to feed the fish.

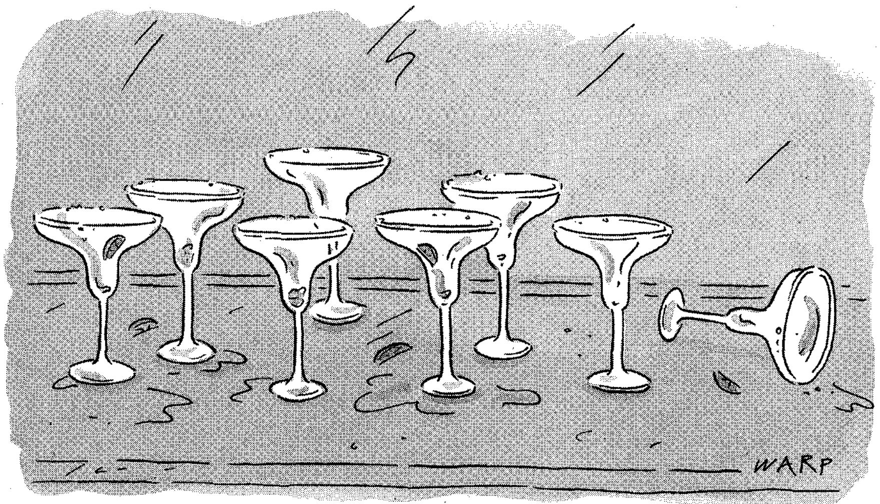


When Vladimir Putin came to power, on New Year's Eve, 1999, we learned that he was a judo expert, that he had a poodle named Toska, and that his grandfather had been a cook for Lenin. But the most salient fact about him was that he was a career K.G.B. agent. And, in eight years as President of the Russian Federation, Putin has been as true to his school as any Old Etonian. According to Olga Kryshtanovskaya, a well-regarded sociologist in Moscow, who studies the biographies of the Russian élites, Putin has filled the leadership ranks with former officials from the K.G.B. and the F.S.B. As he once told an assembly of officers at Lubyanka, "There is no such thing as a former agent."

The most salient fact about Medvedev is not that he will have been elected by the Russian people to be their President but that he was selected by Putin to be his junior partner. Medvedev, of course, understands his role. In the speech in which he announced his candidacy, he thrilled the spies, bureaucrats, and corporate barons who depend on Putin for their status

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BACHTELL

and their wealth by declaring that, if, perchance, he was lucky enough to win, he would make Putin his prime minister. It was at that moment that Dmitry Medvedev became five feet three.



Love Potions No. 1 Through 8

During the depressing simulacrum of an election campaign, Medvedev has been promoted assiduously on state television as a loyal and competent young man who will respond reliably to his master's voice and thereby insure that the Russian economy, buoyed by global oil prices that have quintupled in six years, will continue to flourish. Putin's popularity is the popularity of the autocrat—to oppose him is to risk marginalization, prison, or worse—and the ostensible stability of the country is based on a kind of national pact: as long as ordinary people stay clear of opposition politics, they are free to pursue their private lives.

If there is a marked difference between the two men, it is one of style, particularly in matters of language. Putin, as befits his lifelong profession, is wary, steely, aggressive. No small part of his appeal has been his capacity to dismiss his foes—foreign and domestic, real and imagined—in an earthy Russian argot. Recently, at a bravura multi-hour press conference, he was asked about media reports that, while living in the Kremlin, he had become the richest man in Europe. His response, as translated by the Kremlin, was "They just made it up and included it in their papers." What he actually said was "They just picked it out of their noses and smeared it on their little papers."

Medvedev is more soft-spoken, and, partly as a result, he has acquired a worldlier, more liberal image than some of his peers. In recent weeks, he has even ventured some critical and liberal-sounding comments about the state. "Russia is a country of legal nihilism," he said. "No European country can boast such a universal disregard for the rule of law."

But it makes no more sense to count on Medvedev's "liberalism" than it does to be cheered by his affection for tropical fish and "Smoke on the Water." He was chosen for his loyalty to and compliance with a President who has found a way not to retire. And that is reassuring to all who depend on the arrangements of the status quo. "Medvedev has such a weak personality that he would be raped by lobbyists right on his table on the second day of his Presidency, and Putin knows this," Mikhail Delyagin, a former aide to Boris Yeltsin, remarked recently to the Moscow *Times*. "Unlike Putin—who understands that rage is a big part of the Russian nature and aptly manages this knowledge—Medvedev is a refined and pleasant nobleman's son who can't force his will on anyone."

With time, Medvedev may become his own man, but there is no real sign that he will alter Putin's legacy. The record of increased prosperity is clear, but so is the fact that Putin has eliminated or co-opted all other centers of political influence. There is a puppet legislature, a weak judiciary, and a neutered press. The Russian Orthodox Church has become a tool of the state. Symbols of empire and the Soviet past, including the anthem, have been restored. And, as in Soviet times, the leadership is constantly telling the people that they are threatened by foreign enemies—Ukraine, Georgia, the Baltic states, the United States—as well as by internal rebels. "There will undoubtedly be attempts to overthrow the government. But they will fail," Vladislav Surkov, Putin's deputy chief of staff, told *Der Spiegel* in 2005.

When Yeltsin resigned, eight years ago, he begged his country's forgiveness, and for good reason. There had been many failures committed in his name, especially as he became older and more remote from the democratic processes that he had helped begin. Vladimir Putin, at a moment when he, too, should be stepping into the shadows, has only a sense of self-regard—even a little self-pity—and certainly no self-doubt. "I have worked like a galley slave throughout these eight years, morning till night, and I have given all I could to this work," he said. "I am happy with the results."

—David Remnick

THE POLITICAL SCENE
DREAM ON

The interpretation of dreams, according to Freud, is meant to teach us about individual dreamers' states of mind, not about the people and things that populate our fantasy lives; those are symbols. Teeth, swimming pools, nuns—they stand in for basic human desires and anxieties. When Sheila Heti, a novelist in Toronto, learned that her friend Margaux had recently dreamed about shopping for Tupperware with Hillary Clinton, however, she began to wonder: what if the recurrences of Presidential candidates in people's dreams were meaningful in the aggregate?

"I like Carl Jung and the idea of the

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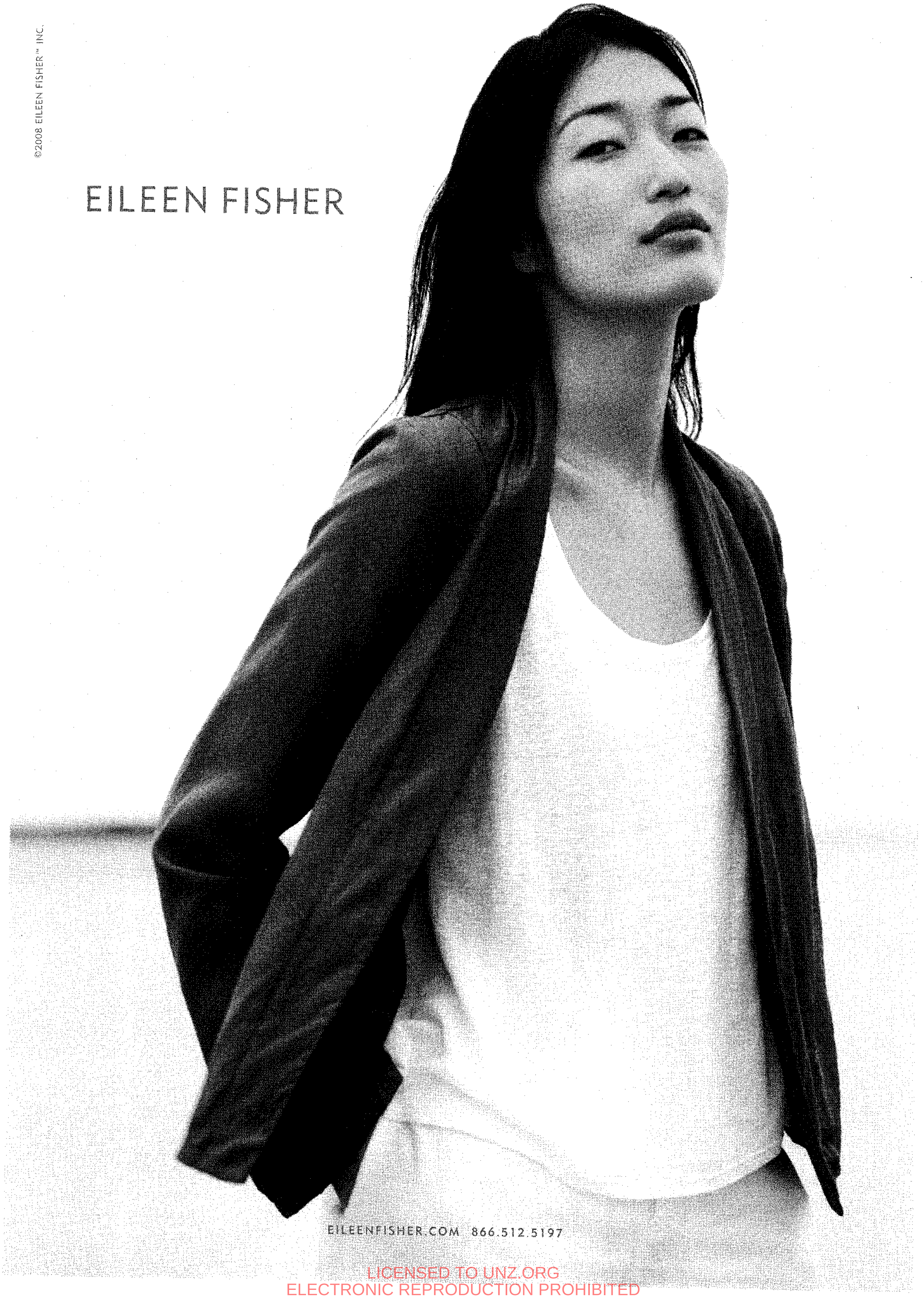
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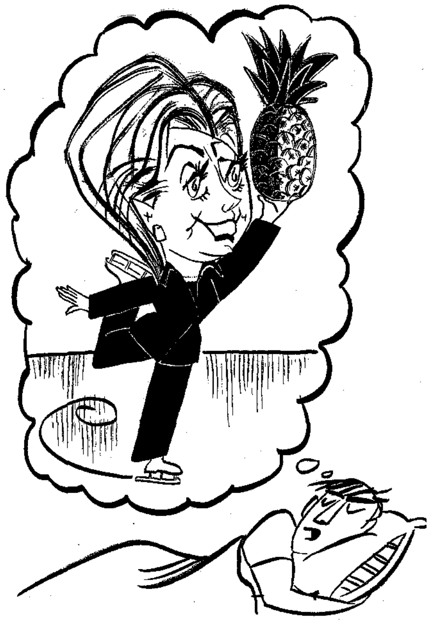
collective unconscious," Heti said the other day. Last month, she established a Web site, IdreamofHillaryIdreamofBarack.com, inviting strangers to submit candidate-related dreams. She calls her project "the world's first metaphysical poll on the Democratic contenders." After a week, Obama's edge in the over-all dream count (thirty-eight to thirty) was roughly equivalent to his lead in the latest Gallup poll.

Clinton fantasies—no surprise—are detail-oriented. A composite dreamland Hillary might look something like this: she wears bad perfume but good lipstick, has great skin, is often hungry (she likes spareribs) but has bad table manners, and, when doing chores (say, cleaning the attic), is fun to be around. She is a dog-lover and an accomplished ice skater.



Pineapples, for some reason, turn up in two separate Clinton dreams, and the Clinton campaign is tough to please. ("They started requesting all sorts of food that we don't serve, like baked potatoes, bouillabaisse, and 'English tea squares.' ")

The Obama dream figure that emerges is not as vivid: a teacher, eight feet tall, with a foul mouth, smoker. He tends to be less active—a conduit. ("I started to write out the letter on the hamburger bun while Obama gave his speech, but with every few strokes the pen would break through the outer surface of the bread into the soft middle.") Obama dreamers also appear to be more international. A Saudi woman imagined he was reading a bedtime story to her (classic father-figure role), and a lawyer from Zimbabwe dreamed of being chased by him (the pursuit of justice). A Canadian film critic recalled the image of "Barack eating the votes that had been cast for Hillary like slices of smoked tofu."

Nightmares are few and largely partisan. (A Baptist man sees Americans streaming into Mexico and realizes that Clinton has won.) Two prominent and predictable themes—sex and death—are perhaps not worth dwelling on, other than to point out that Obama is not the only one whose safety people worry about, nor is he the sole object of romantic desire. Drugs, too, are a common topic. "Hillary Clinton came to my apartment, smoked a bowl with me and a couple friends, then she gave me an iPhone," an Obama supporter dreamed. "We walked around Seattle for a while. I woke up with a strange feeling of satisfaction that it would be O.K. if she wins."

No tunnels, no flying, no going to work naked, but Obama, for what it's worth, rides in style: he shows up in a cream-colored limousine and a stretch Hummer. "We drove down a narrow street with cars parked on both sides, then it dead-ended," an Ohio woman reported of riding shotgun with the candidate. "It didn't look like it was possible to turn around. I became very tense. I thought, Oh, no, he's going to get very angry and run into all these cars. . . . But he very coolly did a seven- or eight-point turn, deftly turning the car around, and we headed back up the street." Clinton is more of a walker, but when she drives she tailgates.

Metapsychologists might wish to study the celebrity cameos. Obama brings Snoop Dogg and Penelope Cruz into the picture; Clinton gets James Carville (with whom she discusses the Cannes Film Festival).

Heti had her own candidate dream, about Obama, a few nights after launching the site, although she hasn't posted it. "We were at the mall or something, and he professed a desire to have an affair with me," she said, and described a tortured process of indecision. "But I have a boyfriend. But then I thought maybe I ought to, because it's Barack Obama, and how often do these opportunities come about? Then the dream took another path, and I ended up a prisoner in the basement."

Heti has had no communication with either candidate's campaign, but she thinks that her site could be a source of constructive inspiration. "I sort of hope that the campaign managers will change the way the candidates give speeches as a result of people's dream lives," she said. "It must be telling them *something*."

—*Ben McGrath*

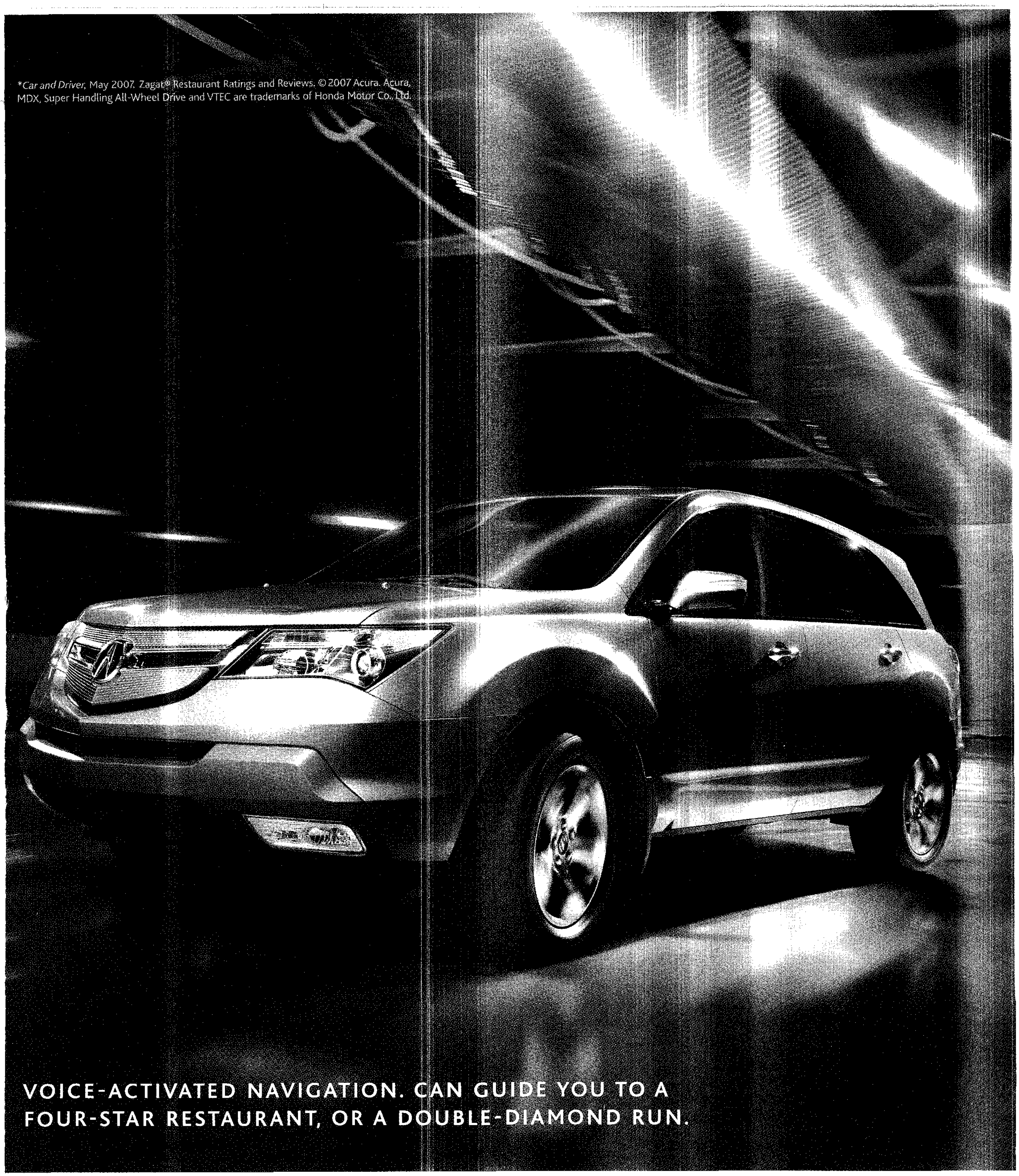
WANT AD
BEAUTIFUL MINDS

Bored at work? Victim of a hiring freeze? In the past few weeks, word has been circulating, among the post-collegiate cubicle crowd, about an exciting new job opportunity. The rumor, according to one (unofficial) e-mail: "Oscar-winning producer Brian Grazer (Da Vinci Code, A Beautiful Mind, American Gangster) is looking for a new cultural attaché." The e-mail explained:

> This person would be responsible for keeping Brian abreast of everything that's going on in the world; politically, culturally, musically. . . . They're also responsible for finding an interesting person for Brian to meet with every week . . . an astronaut, a journalist, a philosopher, a buddhist monk. . . . There is LOTS of reading for this position! Grazer may ask you to read any book he's interested in. You'll probably get to read about 4 or 5 books a week and you may be required to travel with him on his private plane to Hawaii, New York, Europe—teaching him anything he asks you about along the way. . . . You will also be provided with an assistant. . . . Salary is around $150,000 a year. . . . You will be to Grazer what Karl Rove was to Bush.

"This job is kind of an urban legend in Hollywood," a twenty-five-year-old assistant in the movie business said last week. (She had received a similar e-mail, describing the position as Grazer's "idea curator.") Rovian undertones aside, it's actually an old concept: according to Anthony Grafton, a history professor at Princeton, Renaissance and Enlightenment princes often had such a minion, known as a "reader." Frederick the Great, of Prussia, cribbed much of his expertise from a reader named Dantal; Sir Philip Sidney relied on a Livy scholar named Gabriel Harvey to brief him before a meeting with the Holy Roman Emperor.

Cultural attaché to a movie producer. Not a bad gig. But who, in this post-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Renaissance era, could do it? Michael Rosenberg, the president of Imagine, the production company Grazer owns with Ron Howard, said that about a hundred would-be attachés have e-mailed résumés since word of the job got out. One was Ed Cooke, twenty-six, a British writer and education consultant. His résumé: philosophy-and-psych degree from Oxford, three languages, a demonstrated interest in "the philosophy of cricket." "This seemed like a job that would suit me," Cooke said. He'd sent in a list of interesting people: the medieval scholar Mary Carruthers; the cricket star Shane Warne; Dmitri Nabokov.

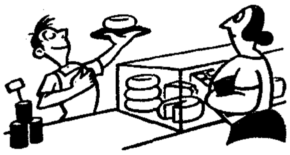
But Cooke didn't make the final cut. By last week, Grazer's staff had already narrowed the potential attachés down to four finalists, who would interview with the boss. "I've met a lot of good candidates," Grazer said, reached on his cell phone en route to a meeting with the screenwriter for "Angels and Demons." He said that he'd been hiring cultural attachés for twenty years, ever since he asked Jonas Salk's assistant to help him track down interesting people in science. Fifteen or twenty people have held the job since then. (The "attaché" title started out as a joke.) "They have to be really resourceful," Grazer said. "I like to meet people in dangerous organizations, and my cultural attaché finds out who that person is—who runs the Yakuza, or the Masons, or MI5." The best attaché so far, Grazer said, has been Brad Grossman, the current one, who is leaving the post, after four years. Grossman is thirty-two; he owned a tutoring business before taking the job, and Grazer said that he is especially good at explaining the things he's asked to learn about—bacteria or makeup or superdelegates. "I'm looking for a person who has that teacherlike quality," Grazer said. "Also, it's good to have a person who is a connector, who is liked by people."

Grazer has had one bad attaché experience. "A few years ago, I hired this really smarty-pants Harvard guy," he said. "He was just remarkably lazy. If he didn't get the *Wall Street Journal* on his desk, it was like it didn't exist." Still, he said, the experience came with a lesson: "Under no condition can you teach curiosity."

Before Grazer became a successful producer, he was—like most people—his own cultural attaché. Two weeks ago, he found a letter he'd written to the physicist Edward Teller during that period. "It made me remember how much work it was," Grazer said. "I had to do the begging and grovelling and ass-kissing myself. I had to find the newspapers and magazines. Even then, I put so much thought and effort into trying to meet and learn from the people who mattered to me."

—*Lizzie Widdicombe*

SCHMEAR DEPT.
EVERYTHING, EVERYWHERE



Until recently, the everything bagel was of murky origin. Given its all-inclusive name, you'd think that whoever came up with the idea would have a capacious ego to match. But a few weeks ago the story went public, on the Web site of a small Long Island advertising business run by a man named David Gussin. Gussin, who describes himself as a "struggling altruistic entrepreneur," claims to have created the everything bagel almost thirty years ago. On the site, he wrote, "It's the one story my daughter's friends always found interesting. So I'll go with it." As declarations of provenance go, this is less like Philo Farnsworth saying he invented the television than like Forrest Gump saying he invented the smiley face.

As is often the case (Post-its, the microwave), the genesis of the everything bagel was a "fluky-type thing," Gussin said the other day. When Gussin was fifteen, he took a part-time job at a take-out place in Howard Beach run by a guy named Charlie. It was a simpler time for bagels: you had plain, poppy, sesame, onion, salt, garlic, and—on the exotic end—cinnamon raisin. One of Gussin's duties at closing time was to sweep up the burnt seeds that had fallen off in the oven during the day. Gussin developed a taste for them, and one afternoon—he guesses around 1980—"instead of throwing them out, like I always did, I swept them into a bin and said, 'Charlie, let's make some with these!' "

Charlie, who was mildly enthusiastic about the idea, agreed to sell the newfangled bagels for a nickel extra. According to Gussin, the name "everything" came instantaneously. "There was no marketing meeting or anything like that," he said. "It was a one-second thought process. Boom." The flavor became popular "the next day," and pretty soon Gussin's brainchild—minus the burnt-seed concept—had spread to a bagel place over in Lindenwood. Within a year, Gussin said, "the everything bagel was everywhere."

Meanwhile, Gussin moved on: he briefly attended college, worked at an employment agency, a shoe store, and a dry-cleaning establishment, and started his company, 516Ads.com. Recounting his post-bagel years, he said, "The everything bagel is my most popular creation, but it's not my most important one." He took a pin out of his pocket emblazoned with the acronym "LEARN": "Let's End All Racism Now." Gussin devised the slogan in the eighties, he explained, after seeing skinheads on an episode of "Sally Jessy Raphael." ("I thought—excuse my language—These people are freaking stupid! Learn!") Eventually, LEARN, which, like the everything bagel, derives from a melting-pot ethos, was adopted as a teaching tool by public schools in Brooklyn.

Gussin never sought to capitalize on the everything bagel. "Admittedly, you think, Wow, what if I made a penny off of every everything bagel?" he said. "But, realistically, who patented pizza? Who patented the bagel, you know? It never even entered my mind."

So far, no one has contested Gussin's claim, setting his invention apart from the radio (Marconi vs. Tesla) and calculus (Leibniz vs. Newton). When asked if he had any hard evidence, Gussin said simply, "It wasn't around the day before I created it, and it never stopped the day after." Maria Balinska, who is writing a book called "The Bagel: A Cultural History," hadn't heard of Gussin when she was reached by phone in London, but she affirmed that the early eighties was a fertile time for bagel experimentation. "You had more consumption of bagels nationwide," she said. "It was absolutely the right time to come up with something like that." She added that Gussin's creation has not yet caught on in England, proving, perhaps, that you can't have everything.

—*Michael Schulman*

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THE FINANCIAL PAGE
HOME ECONOMICS

Americans may disagree about nearly everything, but few contest the idea that owning your home is a good thing. Paeans to homeownership are a commonplace for American politicians, and, since the nineteen-thirties, public policy has been designed to make home buying cheaper and easier. Homeownership, the argument goes, has tremendous social benefits, stabilizing neighborhoods and making people more willing to invest in their communities. And it has economic benefits, too, serving as a forced-savings program that allows people to leverage their incomes and build wealth. Homeownership "provides financial security for families," Mel Martinez, the former H.U.D. Secretary, has said, and it "generates economic strength that fuels the entire nation."

That never seemed more true than in the years from 1994 to 2005, when the percentage of Americans who own homes rose by almost ten per cent, and the amount of wealth tied up in property soared. But our veneration of homeowning has blinded us to the fact that, along with the benefits, it has some very real costs—costs that only get bigger as the ranks of homeowners swell. The housing boom undoubtedly helped the economy's growth rate and made lots of first-time home buyers happy. Unfortunately, it may also end up prolonging and deepening the current downturn.

In part, this is due to the nature of the boom, which was stoked by cheap credit and lax lending standards. Buying a home used to require a sizable down payment: in 1976, the average for a first-time buyer was eighteen per cent. By contrast, a National Association of Realtors study of first-time buyers between mid-2005 and mid-2006 found that almost half put down nothing at all, and that the median down payment was just two per cent. If you earn eighty thousand a year, no one will lend you four hundred thousand dollars to buy stocks, but plenty of people were willing to lend you that money to buy a house. As long as home prices were rising, all this leverage seemed like a good thing: it let people buy homes that they couldn't otherwise afford, and maximized their return on investment. But, with home prices sinking—in the final quarter of 2007, they were down almost nine per cent from the year before—the downside has become clear: as many as fifteen million homeowners now owe more on their mortgages than their homes are worth. Homeownership isn't building wealth for these people; it's locking them into indentured servitude.

The problem was exacerbated by an explosion in home-equity loans, fuelled by our faith that house prices can only rise. According to a recent study by the Federal Reserve, homeowners took out more than six hundred billion dollars in home-equity loans between 2004 and 2005 alone—ten times as much as they had a decade earlier—and are spending much of it on personal consumption. That destroys the forced-savings aspect of homeownership, since people are using up their home equity instead of saving it for the future. And it means that many homeowners have to devote more and more of their income to paying off home-equity debt, contributing to the current slowdown.

Even without lending and borrowing excesses, though, our high rate of homeownership would likely create problems as the economy slows. To recover from recession, economies need prices to fall until they reflect genuine supply and demand. With certain kinds of assets, like stocks, these adjustments take place quickly, sometimes viciously so. Buying and selling houses, though, is a far slower process. The good thing about this is that housing prices never suffer crashes on the scale that you sometimes see in the stock market. The bad thing is that it can take a long time for housing prices to reflect reality. Homeowners, as economists have shown, tend to remain unreasonably optimistic about the value of their homes, and they hate to drop their asking price. As a result, existing-home sales in the U.S. are now at a nine-year low.

Homeownership also impedes the economy's readjustment by tying people down. From a social point of view, it's beneficial that homeownership encourages commitment to a given town or city. But, from an economic point of view, it's good for people to be able to leave places where there's less work and move to places where there's more. Homeowners are much less likely to move than renters, especially during a downturn, when they aren't willing (or can't afford) to sell at market prices. As a result, they often stay in towns even after the jobs leave. That may be why a study of several major developed economies between 1960 and 1996, by the British economist Andrew Oswald, found a strong relationship between increases in homeownership and increases in the unemployment rate; a ten-per-cent increase in homeownership correlated with a two-per-cent increase in unemployment. (In the U.S., it may be worth noting, the states that have the highest unemployment rates—states like Alabama, Michigan, Mississippi—are also among those with the highest homeownership rates.) And reluctance to move not only keeps unemployment high in struggling areas but makes it hard for businesses elsewhere to attract the workers they need to grow.

This doesn't mean that the U.S. should become a nation of renters—even if both New York City and Switzerland show that high rates of renting are compatible with great prosperity. With the bursting of the housing bubble, though, it's time not just to scrutinize the excesses of our home-buying process but to recognize the risks and costs inherent in owning a home. Sometimes the price—for the home buyer and for the economy as a whole—is too high to pay.

—*James Surowiecki*

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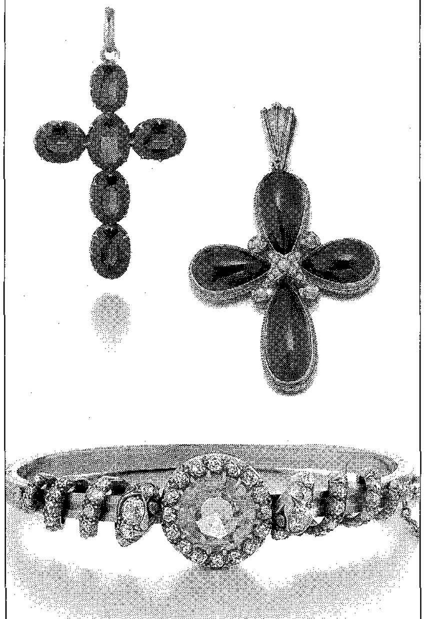

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REFLECTIONS

SECRET SKIN

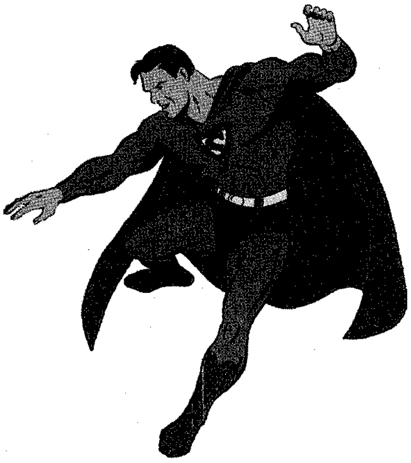
An essay in unitard theory.

BY MICHAEL CHABON

When I was a boy, I had a religious-school teacher named Mr. Spector, whose job was to confront us with the peril we presented to ourselves. Jewish Ethics was the name of the class. We must have been eight or nine.

Mr. Spector used a workbook to guide the discussion; every Sunday, we began by reading a kind of modern parable or cautionary tale, and then contended with a series of imponderable questions. One day, for example, we discussed the temptations of shoplifting; another class was devoted to all the harm to oneself and to others that could be caused by the telling of lies. Mr. Spector was a gently acerbic young man with a black beard and black Roentgen-ray eyes. He seemed to take our moral failings for granted and, perhaps as a result, favored lively argument over reproach or condemnation. I enjoyed our discussions, while remaining perfectly aloof at my core from the issues they raised. I was, at the time, an awful liar, and quite a few times had stolen chewing gum and baseball cards from the neighborhood Wawa. None of that seemed to have anything to do with Mr. Spector or the cases we studied in Jewish Ethics. All nine-year-olds are sophists and hypocrites; I found it no more difficult than any other kid to withhold my own conduct from consideration in passing measured judgment on the human race.

The one time I felt my soul to be in danger was the Sunday Mr. Spector raised the ethical problem of escapism, particularly as it was experienced in the form of comic books. That day, we started off with a fine story about a boy who loved Superman so much that he tied a red towel around his neck, climbed up to the roof of his house, and, with a cry of "Up, up, and away," leaped to his death. There was known to have been such a boy, Mr. Spector informed us—at least one verifiable boy, so enraptured and so betrayed by the false dream of Superman that it killed him.



COURTESY DC COMICS

The explicit lesson of the story was that what was found between the covers of a comic book was fantasy, and "fantasy" meant pretty lies, the consumption of which failed to prepare you for what lay outside those covers. Fantasy rendered you unfit to face "reality" and its hard pavement. Fantasy betrayed you, and thus, by implication, your wishes, your dreams and longings, everything you carried around inside your head that only you and Superman and Elliot S! Maggin (exclamation point and all, the principal Superman writer circa 1971) could understand—all these would betray you, too. There were ancillary arguments to be made as well, about the culpability of those who produced such fare, sold it to minors, or permitted their children to bring it into the house.

These arguments were mostly lost on me, a boy who consumed a dozen comic books a week, all of them cheerfully provided to him by his (apparently iniquitous) father. Sure, I might not be prepared for reality—point granted—but, on the other hand, if I ever found myself in the Bottle City of Kandor, under the bell jar in the Fortress of Solitude, I would know not to confuse Superman's

Kryptonian double (Van-Zee) with Clark Kent's (Vol-Don). Rather, what struck me, with the force of a blow, was recognition, a profound moral recognition of the implicit, indeed the secret, premise of the behavior of the boy on the roof. For that fool of a boy had not been doomed by the deceitful power of comic books, which after all were only bundles of paper, staples, and ink, and couldn't hurt anybody. That boy had been killed by the irresistible syllogism of Superman's cape.

One knew, of course, that it was not the red cape any more than it was the boots, the tights, the trunks, or the trademark "S" that gave Superman the ability to fly. That ability derived from the effects of the rays of our yellow sun on Superman's alien anatomy, which had evolved under the red sun of Krypton. And yet you had only to tie a towel around your shoulders to feel the strange vibratory pulse of flight stirring in the red sun of your heart.

I, too, had climbed to a dangerous height, with my face to the breeze, and felt magically alone of my kind. I had imagined the streak of my passage like a red-and-blue smear on the windowpane of vision. I had been Batman, too, and the Mighty Thor. I had stood cloaked in the existential agonies of the Vision, son of a robot and grandson of a lord of the ants. A few years after that Sunday in Mr. Spector's class, at the pinnacle of my career as a hero of the imagination, I briefly transformed myself (more about this later) into a superpowered warrior-knight known as Aztec. And all that I needed to effect the change was to fasten a terry-cloth beach towel around my neck.

It was not about escape, I wanted to tell Mr. Spector, thus unwittingly plagiarizing in advance the well-known formula of a (fictitious) pioneer and theorist of superhero comics, Sam Clay. It was about *transformation.*

The American comic book preëxisted the superhero, but just barely, and with so little distinction that in the cultural mind the medium has always seemed indistinguishable from its first stroke of brilliance. There were costumed crime-fighters before Superman (the Phantom, Zorro), but only as there were pop quartets before the Beatles. Superman invented and exhausted his genre in a single bound. All the tropes, all the clichés and conventions, all the possibilities, all the longings and wishes and neuroses that have driven and fed and burdened the superhero comic during the past seventy years were implied by and contained within that little red rocket ship hurtling toward Earth. That moment—Krypton exploding, *Action Comics No. 1*—is generally seen to be Minute Zero of the superhero idea.

About the reasons for the arrival of Superman at that zero moment there is less agreement. In the theories of origin put forward by fans, critics, and other origin-obsessives, the *idea* of Superman has been accounted the offspring or recapitulation, in no particular order, of Friedrich Nietzsche; of Philip Wylie (in his novel "Gladiator"); of the strengths, frailties, and neuroses of his creators, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, of Cleveland, Ohio; of the aching wishfulness of the Great Depression; of the (Jewish) immigrant experience; of the mastermind stratagems of popular texts in their sinister quest for reader domination; of repressed Oedipal fantasies and homoerotic wishes; of fascism; of capitalism; of the production modes of mass culture (and not in a good way); of celebrated strongmen and proponents of physical culture like Eugen Sandow; and of a host of literary not-quite-Superman precursors, chief among them Doc Savage.

Most of these rationales of origin depend, to some extent, on history; they index the advent of Superman, in mid-1938, to various intellectual, social, and economic trends of the Depression years, to the influence or aura of contemporary celebrities and authors, to the structure and demands of magazine publishing and distribution, et cetera. To suit my purpose here, I might construct a similar etiology of the superhero costume, making due reference, say, to professional-wrestling and circus attire of the early twentieth century, to the boots-cloak-and-tights ensembles worn by swashbucklers and cavaliers in stage plays and Hollywood films, to contemporary men's athletic wear, with its unitard construction and belted trunks, to the designs of Alex Raymond and Hal Foster and the amazing pulp-magazine cover artist Frank R. Paul. I could cite the influence of Art Deco and Streamline Moderne aesthetics, with their roots in fantasies of power, speed, and flight, or posit the costume as a kind of fashion alter ego of the heavy, boxy profile of men's clothing at the time. When in fact the point of origin is not a date or a theory or a conjunction of

cultural trends but a story, the intersection of a wish and the tip of a pencil.

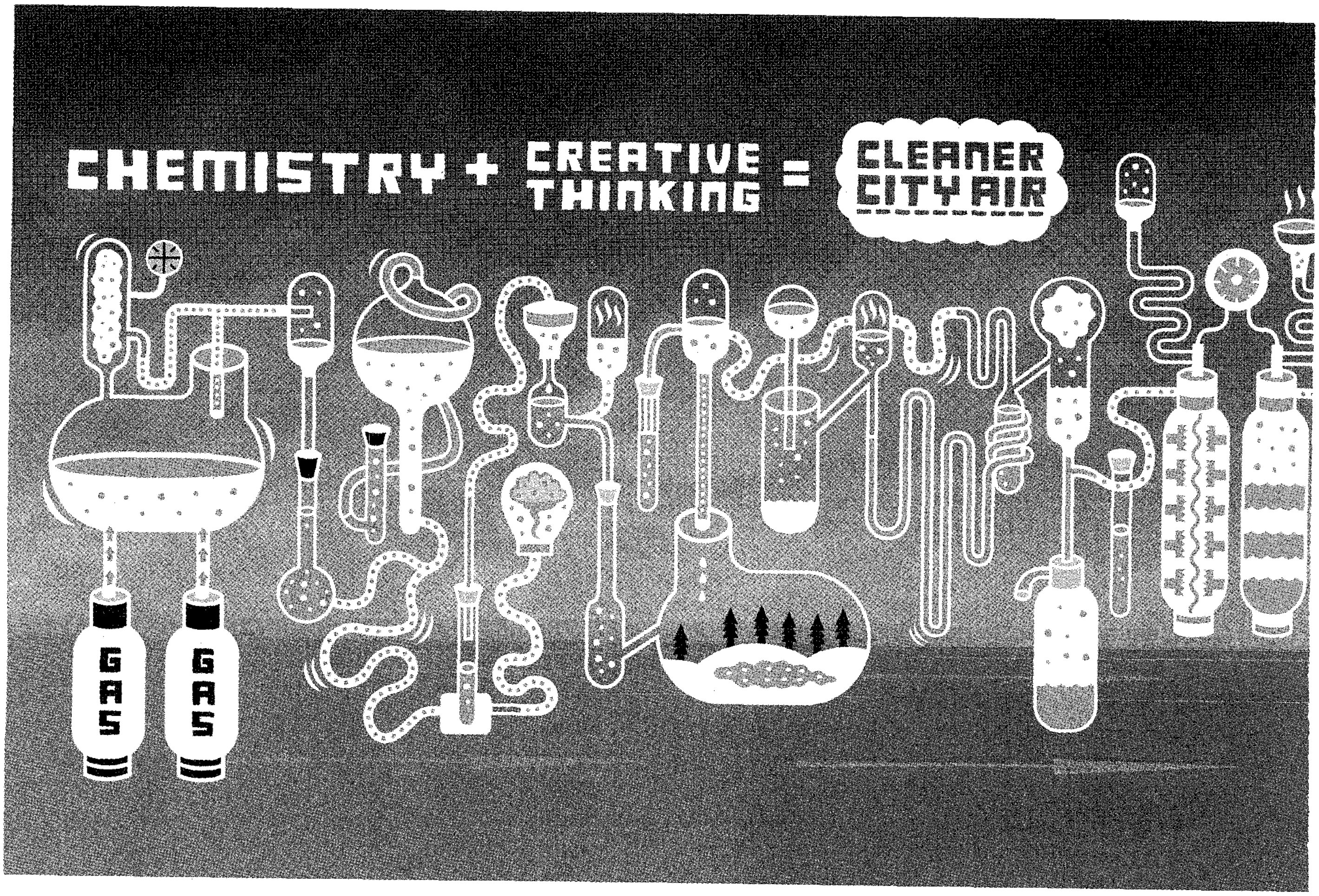
Now the time has come to propose, or confront, a fundamental truth: like the being who wears it, the superhero costume is, by definition, an impossible object. It cannot exist.

One may easily find suggestive evidence for this assertion at any large comic-book convention by studying the spectacle of the brave and bold convention attendees, those members of the general comics-fan public who show up in costume and go shpatziring around the ballrooms and exhibition halls dressed as Wolverine, say, or the Joker's main squeeze, Harley Quinn. Without exception, even the most splendid of these getups is at best a disappointment. Every seam, every cobweb strand of duct-tape gum, every laddered fish-net stocking or visible ridge of underpants elastic—every stray mark, pulled thread, speck of dust—acts to spoil what is instantly revealed to have been, all along, an illusion.

The appearance of realism in a superhero costume made from real materials is generally recognized to be difficult to pull off, and many such costumes do not even bother to simulate the presumable effect on the eye and the spirit of the beholder were Black Bolt to stride, trailing a positronic lace of Kirby crackle, into a ballroom of the Overland Park Marriott. This disappointing air of saggy trouser seats, bunchy underarms, and wobbly shoulder vanes may be the result of imaginative indolence, the sort that would permit a grown man to tell himself he will find gratification in walking the exhibition floor wearing a pair of Dockers, a Jägermeister hoodie, and a rubber Venom mask complete with punched-out eyeholes and flopping rubber bockwurst of a tongue.

But realism is not, in fact, merely *difficult;* it is hopeless. A plausibly heroic physique is of no avail in this regard, nor is even the most fervent willingness to believe in oneself as the man or woman in the cape. Even those costumed conventioneers who go all out, working year-round to amass, scrounge, or counterfeit cleverly the materials required to put together, with glue gun, soldering iron, makeup, and needle and thread, a faithful and accurate Black Canary or Ant-Man costume, find themselves prey to forces, implacable as gravity, of tawdriness, gimcrackery, and unwitting self-ridicule. And in the end they look no more like Black Canary or Ant-Man than does the poor zhlub in the Venom mask with a three-day pass hanging around his neck on a lanyard.

This sad outcome even in the wake of thousands of dollars spent and months of hard work given to sewing and to packing foam rubber into helmets has an obvious, an unavoidable, explanation: a superhero's costume is constructed not of fabric, foam rubber, or adamantium but of halftone dots, Pantone color values, inked containment lines, and all the cartoonist's sleight of hand. The superhero costume *as drawn* disdains the customary relationship in the fashion world between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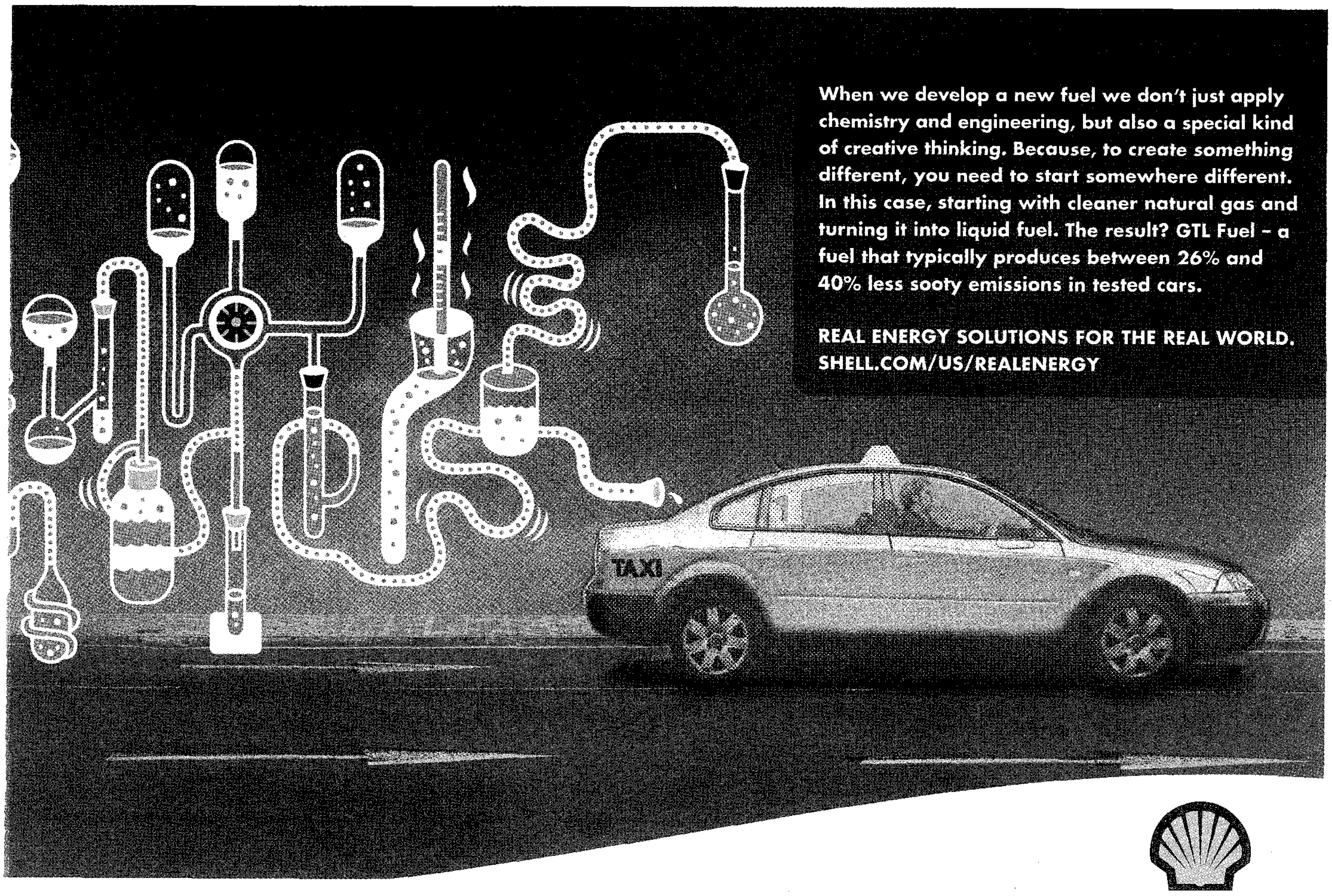
sketch and garment. It makes no suggestions. It has no agenda. Above all, it is not waiting to find fulfillment as cloth draped on a body. A constructed superhero costume is a replica with no original, a model built on a scale of *x*:1. However accurate and detailed, such a work has the tidy airlessness of a model-train layout but none of the gravitas that such little railyards and townscapes derive from making faithful reference to homely things. The graphic purity of the superhero costume means that the more effort and money you lavish on fine textiles, metal grommets, and leather trim the deeper your costume will be sucked into the silliness singularity that swallowed, for example, Joel Schumacher's Batman and Robin and their four nipples.

In fact, the most reliable proof of the preposterousness of superhero attire whenever it is translated, as if by a Kugelmass device, from the pages of comics to the so-called real world can be found in film and television adaptations of superhero characters. George Reeves's stodgy pajamas-like affair in the old "Superman" TV series and Adam West's mod doll clothes in "Batman" have lately given way to purportedly more "realistic" versions, in rubber, leather, and plastic, pseudo-utilitarian coveralls that draw inspiration in equal measure from spacesuits, catsuits, and scuba suits, and from (one presumes) regard for the dignity of actors who have seen the old George Reeves and Adam West shows, and would not be caught dead in those glorified Underoos. In its attempts to slip the confines of the panelled page, the superhero costume betrays its nonexistence, like one of those deep-sea creatures which evolved to thrive in the crushing darkness of the seabed, so that when you haul them up to the dazzling surface they burst.

One might go farther and argue not only that the superhero costume has (and needs) no referent in the world of textiles and latex but also that, even within its own proper comic-book context, it can be said not to exist, not to *want* to exist—can be said to advertise, even to revel in, its own notional status. This illusionary quality of the drawn costume can readily be seen if we attempt to delimit the elements of the superhero wardrobe, to inventory its minimum or requisite components.

We can start by throwing away our masks. Superman, arguably the first and the greatest of all costumed heroes, has never bothered with one, nor have Captain Marvel, Luke Cage, Wonder Woman, Valkyrie, and Supergirl. All those individuals, like many of their peers (Hawkman, Giant-Man), also go around barehanded, which suggests that we can safely dispense with our gauntlets (whether finned, rolled, or worn with a jaunty slash at the cuff). Capes have been an object of scorn among discerning superheroes at least since 1974, when Captain America, having abandoned his old career in protest over Watergate, briefly took on the nom de guerre Nomad, dressed himself in a piratical ensemble of midnight blue and gold, and brought his first exploit as a stateless hero to an in-



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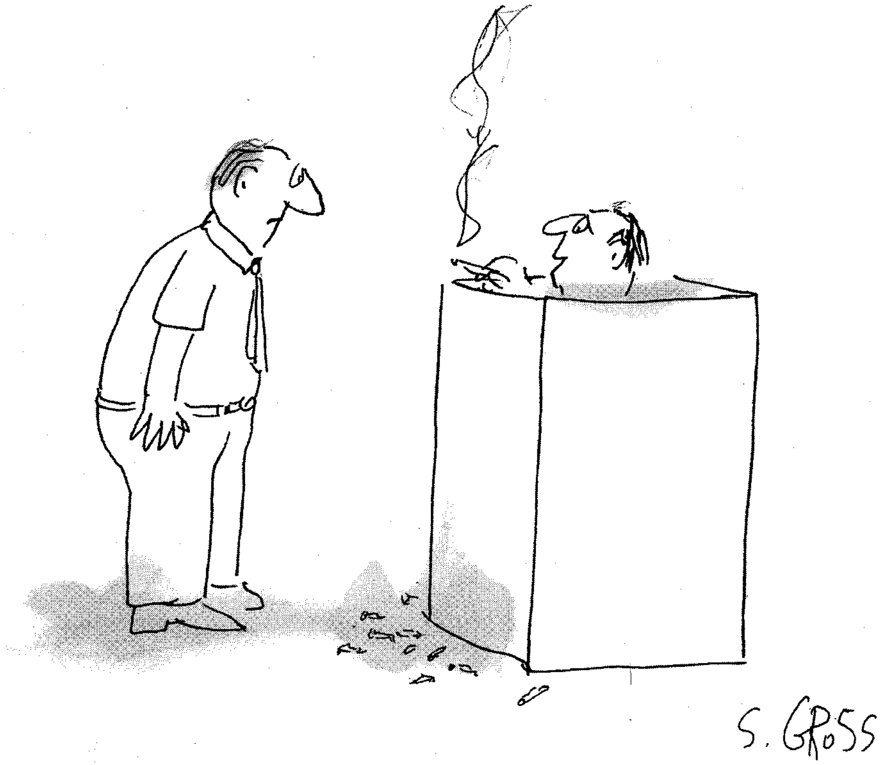

"I'll keep thinking inside the box as long as they let me smoke in the box."

• •

glorious end by tripping over his own flowing cloak.

So let's lose the cape. As for the boots—we are not married to the boots. After all, Iron Fist sports a pair of kung-fu slippers, the Spirit wears brown brogues, Zatanna works her magic in stiletto heels, and Beast, Ka-Zar, and Mantis wear no shoes at all. Perhaps, though, we had better hold on to our unitards, crafted of some nameless but readily available fabric that, like a thin matte layer, at once coats and divulges the splendor of our musculature. Assemble the collective, all-time memberships of the Justice League of America, the Justice Society of America, the Avengers, the Defenders, the Invaders, the X-Men, and the Legion of Super-Heroes (and let us not forget the Legion of Substitute Heroes), and you will probably find that almost all of them, from Nighthawk to the Chlorophyll Kid, arrive wearing some version of the classic leotard-tights ensemble. And yet—not everyone. Not Wonder Woman, in her star-spangled hot pants and eagle bustier; not the Incredible Hulk or Martian Manhunter or the Sub-Mariner.

Consideration of the last named leads us to cast a critical eye, finally, on our little swim trunks, typically worn with a belt, pioneered by Kit Walker (for the Ghost Who Walks), the Phantom of the old newspaper strip, and popularized by the super-trendsetter of Metropolis. The Sub-Mariner wears nothing *but* a Eurotrashy green Speedo, suggesting that, at least by the decency standards of the old Comics Code, this minimal garment marks the zero degree of superheroic attire. And yet, of course, the Flash, Green Lantern, and many others make do without trunks over their tights; the forgoing of trunks in favor of a continuous flow of fabric from legs to torso is frequently employed to lend a suggestion of speed, sleekness, a kind of uncluttered modernism. And the Hulk never goes around in anything but those tattered purple trousers.

So we are left with, literally, nothing at all: the human form, unadorned, smooth, muscled, and ready, let's say, to sail the starry ocean of the cosmos on the deck of a gleaming surfboard. A naked spacefarer, sheathed in a silvery pseudoskin that affords all the protection one needs from radiation and cosmic dust while meeting Code standards by neatly neutering one, the shining void between the legs serving to signify that one is not (as one often appears to be when seen from behind) naked as an interstellar jaybird.

Here is a central paradox of superhero attire: from panther black to lantern green, from the faintly Hapsburg pomp of the fifties-era Legion of Super-Heroes costumes to the "Mad Max" space grunge of Lobo, from sexy fish-net to vibranium—for all the mad recombinant play of color, style, and materials that the superhero costume makes with its limited number of standard components, it ultimately takes its deepest meaning and serves its primary function in the depiction of the naked human form, unfettered, perfect, and free. The superheroic wardrobe resembles a wildly permutated alphabet of ideograms conceived only to express the eloquent power of silence.

A public amnesia, an avowed lack of history, is the standard pretense of the costumed superhero. From the point of view of the man or woman or child in the street, gaping up at the sky and skyscrapers, the appearance of a new hero over Metropolis or New York or Astro City is always a matter of perfect astonishment. There have been no portents or warnings, and afterward one never learns anything new or gains any explanations.

The story of a superhero's origin must be kept secret, occulted as rigorously from public knowledge as the alter ego, as if it were a source of shame. Superman conceals, archived in the Fortress of Solitude and accessible only to him, not only his own history—the facts and tokens of his birth and arrival on Earth, of his Smallville childhood, of his exploits and adventures—but the history of his Kryptonian family and, indeed, of his entire race. Batman similarly hides his story and its proofs in the trophy chambers of the Batcave.

In theory, the costume forms part of the strategy of concealment. But in fact the superhero's costume often functions as a kind of magic screen onto which the repressed narrative may be projected. No matter how well he or she hides its traces, the secret narrative of transformation, of rebirth, is given up by the costume. Sometimes this secret is betrayed through the allusion of style or form: Robin's gaudy uniform hints at the murder of his circus-acrobat parents, Iron Man's at the flawed heart that requires a life-support device, which is the primary function of his armor.

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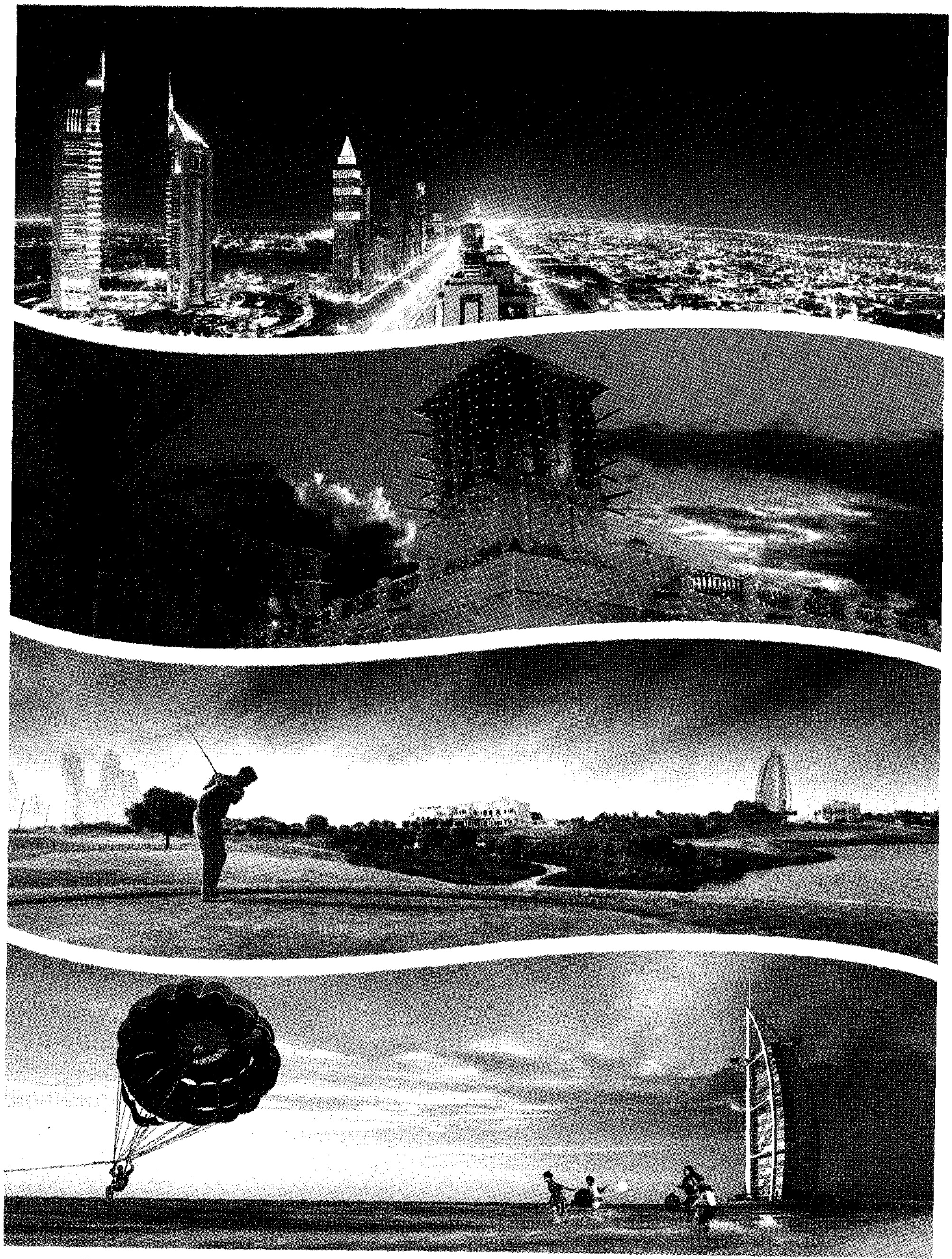

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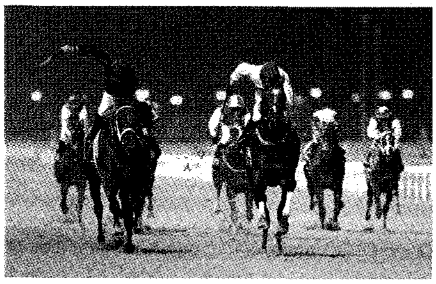
For athletes and sports enthusiasts, this United Arab Emirates city-state has become quite a desert playground. It's where Tiger Woods is designing his first golf course, the **Al Ruwaya**, which will be part of a lavish leisure complex called **Dubailand** and is scheduled for completion late next year. Woods is a past winner of the **Dubai Desert Classic**, a European PGA Tour event, which is an important asterisk on the annual sanctioned calendar and which at press time was expecting a record turnout.



For old desert hands who remember when golf in this region meant hauling a small patch of AstroTurf around the sand, it is all very different now.

Tour stars like Greg Norman, Ernie Els, Jack Nicklaus, and Colin Montgomerie have all designed courses in Dubai ranging from the relaxing to the fiendishly demanding, enticing many business travelers to work in a round of golf.

Another star-studded sporting event is the **Dubai Tennis Championships**, which has attracted top-ranked players like Roger Federer and Justine Henin. This two-week tournament, which is running through March 8th, is followed by the **Dubai World Cup** on March 29th. Billed as the world's richest horse race, it offers a six-million-dollar prize and draws an equally dazzling crowd.

Beyond spectator sports, visitors to Dubai can get their own adrenaline flowing by scuba diving at the **Jumeirah Beach Hotel**, horseback riding at the **Dubai Polo & Equestrian Club**, and fishing for kingfish, barracuda, or sailfish from October to May. More eclectic options include "sand boarding" in the desert dunes or taking a run down the snowy indoor slopes at the **Ski Dubai** resort year-round.

All of these activities work up big appetites, and Dubai has attracted some of the world's top chefs to set up shop. For late-night revelers, this city of ceaseless activity also boasts about two hundred night clubs.

Although Dubai is known as a thriving business capital, its recreational opportunities and infectious energy have helped make it a magnet for world travelers. With its centuries-old heritage as a fishing village and trading port, it is fitting that the city's ranking icon is a building shaped like the billowing sail of a dhow.

The traditional sailing vessel inspired the design of the towering **Dubai Creek Golf & Yacht Club** as well as the **Burj Al Arab**, the world's tallest hotel. Reaching a staggering height of more than a thousand feet, this majestic building symbolizes Dubai's adventurous spirit and pursuit of new horizons, qualities many travelers will recognize as their own.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: SPEEDBOAT ©RAGHDA BUKHASH; DUBAI GOLF COURSE ©ADISESHAN SHANKAR/ALAMY; HORSE RACING COURTESY OF DUBAI TOURISM

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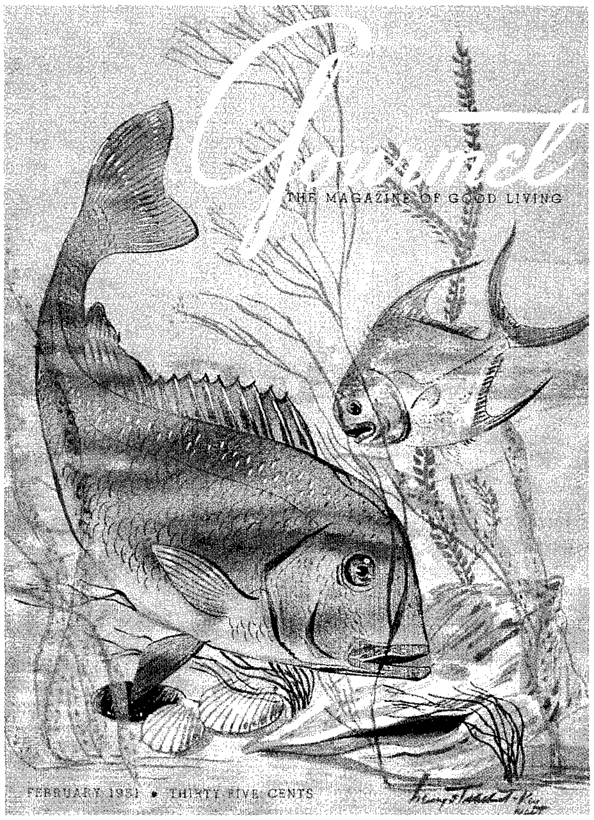
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More often, the secret narrative is hinted at with a kind of enigmatic, dreamlike obviousness right on the hero's chest or belt buckle, in the form of the requisite insignia. Superman's "S," we have been told, only coincidentally stands for Superman: in fact, the emblem is the coat of arms of the ancient Kryptonian House of El, from which he descends. A stylized bat alludes to the animal whose chance flight through a window sealed Bruce Wayne's fate; a lightning bolt encapsulates the secret history of Captain Marvel; an eight-legged glyph immortalizes the bug whose bite doomed Peter Parker to his glorious and woebegone career.

We say "secret identity," and adopt a series of cloaking strategies to preserve it, but what we are actually trying to conceal is a narrative: not who we are but the story of how we got that way—and, by implication, of all that we lacked, and all that we were not, before the spider bit us. Yet our costume conceals nothing, reveals everything: it is our secret skin, exposed and exposing us for all the world to see. Superheroism is a kind of transvestism; our superdrag serves at once to obscure the exterior self that no longer defines us while betraying, with half-unconscious panache, the truth of the story we carry in our hearts, the story of our transformation, of our story's recommencement, of our rebirth into the world of adventure, of story itself.

I became Aztec in the summer of 1973, in Columbia, Maryland, a planned suburban utopia halfway between Smallville and Metropolis. It happened one summer day as I was walking to the swimming pool with a friend. He wore a pair of midnight-blue bathing trunks; my trunks were loud, with patches of pink, orange, gold, and brown overprinted with abstract patterns that we took for Aztec (though they were probably Polynesian). In those days, a pair of bathing trunks did not in the least resemble the baggy board shorts that boys and men wear swimming today. Ours were made of stretchy polyester doubleknit that came down the thigh just past the level of the crotch, and fashion fitted them with a sewn-on, false belt of elastic webbing that buckled at the front with a metal clasp. They looked, in other words, just like the trunks favored by costumed heroes ever since the last son of Krypton came voguing down the super-catwalk, back in 1938. Around our throats we knotted our beach towels (his was blue, mine a fine 1973 shade of burnt orange), those enchanted cloaks whose power Mr. Spector had failed to understand or to recall from his own childhood. They fluttered out behind us, catching the breeze from our imaginations, as Darklord and Aztec walked along.

Darklord carried a sword, and wore a Barbuta helmet, with a flowing crusader cloak and invulnerable chain mail of "lunar steel." Aztec wore tights and a feathered cloak and wielded a magic staff tipped with obsidian. We had begun the journey that day, through the street-melting, shimmering green Maryland summer morning, as a pair of lonely boys with nothing in common but that loneliness, which we shared with Superman and Batman, who shared it with each other—a fundamental loneliness and a wild aptitude for transformation. But with every step we became Darklord and Aztec a little more surely, a little more irrevocably, transformed by the green-lantern rays of fancy, by the spider bite of inspiration, by the story we were telling each other and ourselves about two costumed superheroes, about the new selves that had been revealed by our secret skin.

Talking, retying the knots of our capes, flip-flops slapping against the soles of our feet, we transformed not only ourselves. In the space of that walk to the pool we also transformed the world, shaping it into a place in which such things were possible: the reincarnation of an Arthurian knight could find solace and partnership in the company of a latter-day Mesoamerican wizard. An entire world of superheroic adventure could be dreamed up by a couple of boys from Columbia, or Cleveland. And the self you knew you contained, the story you knew you had inside you, might find its way like an emblem onto the spot right over your heart. All we needed to do was accept the standing invitation that superhero comics extended to us by means of a towel. It was an invitation to enter into the world of story, to join in the ongoing business of comic books, and, with the knotting of a magical beach towel, to begin to wear what we knew to be hidden inside us. ♦

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Michael Chabon talks about superheroes.

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TWO FOR ONE

Isabel and Ruben Toledo: a marriage that wears well.

BY JUDITH THURMAN

There are some clothes, like cars, that pique your curiosity, and you just have to know (or, if you are a child of the quiz-show era, to show off by guessing) their make and model. About ten years ago, I startled a grande dame by asking her if the cocktail dress she was wearing, hands down the chicest in the room, wasn't a Dior, from 1948. It looked perfectly contemporary, but Dior did some of his greatest work in the same fabric: a glossy, malleable black satin that held its shape like meringue. "Yes," she admitted, "but please don't tell anyone that I've been wearing it for half a century."

Not long afterward, at a party downtown, I saw another black dress, which was equally worthy of reverence, but this one I couldn't place, even after I had examined it from every angle. It belonged to a youthful woman who carried herself without the sense of preciousness that often marks a couture client like the grande dame. The material was unpretentious—cotton or rayon matte jersey—so not couture, I thought, yet like couture the cut had a mandarin inscrutability. Softly pleated, overlapping swags fell from the shoulders and were molded to the body like the leaves of a corn husk, tapering to a narrow V that should have hobbled the woman's ankles, but she moved gracefully. I was just about to tap her on the shoulder when she turned and, reading my intentions with a look of amusement, uttered two words: "Isabel Toledo."

My first encounter with Toledo's work was an upscale parody of a commercial that fashion lovers of a certain age will remember. The commercial—for the Anne Klein budget line, Anne Klein II—ran in the nineteen-eighties and made a deeper impression than the sportswear it advertised. There were several spots, all a version of the same scenario. In one, a handsome cowboy notices a cool, urban-looking woman in a fast car who has stopped to make a phone call at a gas station. As she strides toward the booth with a jacket tossed over her shoulders, then juggles her Filofax with the receiver, she catches the cowboy sizing her up but pays no attention. He seems mystified, as much by his own attraction as by her independence. (That wishful notion—that independence is attractive to he-men—lives on as a plot staple of cable television.) Just as he is mustering the courage to address her, she utters three words: "Anne Klein II."

In 2006, Isabel Toledo, of all people, was hired as the creative director of Anne Klein. She has always been her own woman, so the choice seemed apt

The Toledos at home. The clothes are by Isabel; the art work is by Ruben. Photograph by Max Vadukul.

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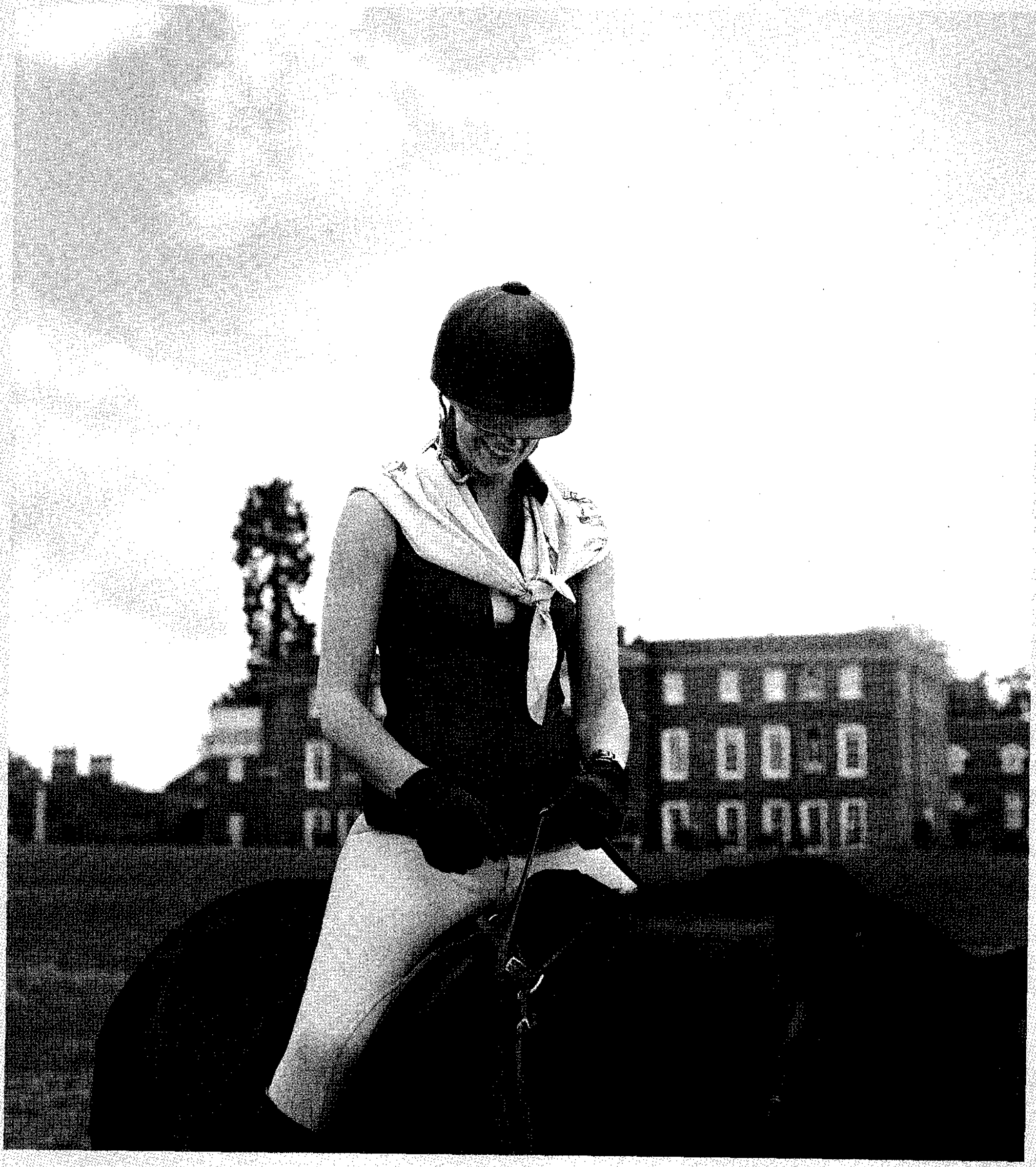

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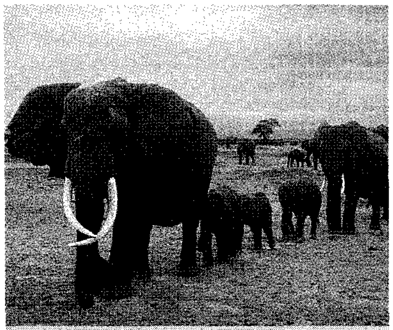

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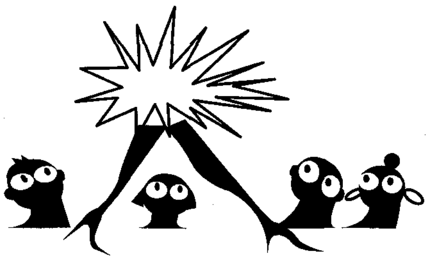
demographically, if for no other reason. But Anne Klein makes clothing for the office and for suburban weekends, and is sold largely in malls, whereas Toledo, a forty-seven-year-old, Cuban-born avant-gardist, is virtually unknown outside the fashion world, and initiates speak of her talent with the kind of awe generally reserved for a chess prodigy. She is often mentioned with Geoffrey Beene and Charles James as a designer's designer, someone whose cutting has an ingenious rigor not obvious to a layman. "I think one can fairly call Isabel a genius," Valerie Steele told me recently. (Steele, the director of the museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, is planning to give Toledo a "mid-career" retrospective in 2009.) "She has an ability to do the kind of spatial modelling in her head that a computer does. By pulling a drawstring through the fabric, or folding it like origami, though also using more conventional techniques—seaming and draping—in innovative ways, she transforms a geometric plane into a poetic volume that you couldn't have imagined." (Toledo has described her craft as "romantic mathematics.")

Toledo's surprise appointment to her position at Anne Klein, and her abrupt dismissal from it, one year and three well-received collections later, got more press than her own line has ever generated. She has worked outside the mainstream, without much fanfare or capital (yet always with the interest of an élite—she won a Cooper-Hewitt National Design Award in 2005), for the past quarter of a century, and her longevity in a fickle business that eats its young and abandons its old on the ice floes of oblivion is a rare feat. "Maybe I've survived because I'm *not* a fashion person," she told me. "I don't like the disposable culture fashion feeds into—I see myself as a maker of great hand-me-downs. Objects or clothes last because they function, and because you've found the most rational solution to a design problem." (Despite her beauty—huge eyes in a pale, angular face with a regal forehead—Toledo doesn't look much like a fashion person, either, or, at least, not in her working uniform: a pair of clogs, white carpenter pants, and a sweater, with her old-fashioned hair cascading down her back like the tresses of a Gothic Magdalene from Galicia, where her mother's family originated.)

Since 1984, when she opened her house, working out of a tenement next to the Port Authority and doing all the sewing herself, Toledo has been married to her business partner, Ruben Toledo, an artist, set designer, filmmaker, and one of the fashion world's leading illustrators. (In the introduction to "Style Dictionary," Ruben's affectionately scathing cartoon glossary of fashion's absurdities, Richard Martin, the late curator of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum, compared his work to the caricatures of Daumier and Grandville.)

The Toledos are an inseparable couple—a collective of two. He is the impetuous, outgoing one, a wiry man with a trim mustache who cuts the figure of a bohemian dandy and does most of the talking. They have a long lease on four floors of a loft building in the flower district, which houses her workrooms, and they live upstairs, in a garret penthouse they renovated on the cheap, fifteen years ago. A dining room, furnished with a marble drafting table at which they eat and work, opens onto a listing balcony that overlooks a former lithography studio. They sleep on a mezzanine, under a ceiling splotched by a century of water stains—yellow scabs that sometimes reopen. Ruben covered two of the walls with a graffiti-like frieze of faces. The décor is, as he puts it, "a crazy quilt" of found objects—puppets, a birdcage, hula hoops—some hanging from the rafters. A cactus from Woolworth's is now, thanks to Isabel's "insane green thumb," fifteen feet tall. Friends contributed eccentric furniture, and, surrounded by art books, canvases, and stylized dress forms that Ruben designs for Pucci Mannequins (including the refreshingly well-padded "Birdie"—38-32-44), a woodworm-ridden Buddha sits on an odd-shaped table. A week before Christmas, the drafts rattling the safety glass of a big skylight in the main room, which frames a view of the Empire State Building, were so icy that I asked Isabel to lend me a sweater—



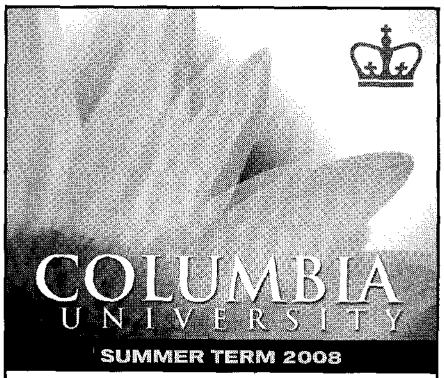
the Toledos sometimes have to wear the matching ski suits that hang on pegs in the bathroom. She does the cooking in a tiny alcove, and he brews the Cuban coffee. They have Sunday brunch together, lingering over it for hours, and at night, if they don't feel like going out, Ruben said, "we put some cha-cha or rumba music on and boogie around by ourselves. We're both great dancers."

Ruben's well-paid commercial art has seen them through hard times, and, in the beginning, he did the cutting for her designs, pressed the samples, and delivered the orders by taxi to the few outlets in Manhattan—Bendel's, uptown, and Patricia Field, on East Eighth Street—that were adventurous enough to carry them. The Toledos are no longer struggling artists (although the romantic ethos of authenticity and creative struggle is part of their identity), but they still operate on an artisanal scale. Their company employs about a dozen people, most of them Chinese—former sweatshop workers whom Toledo retrains—and a few brainy interns, generally from the top of their classes at Parsons or F.I.T. When Isabel has puzzled out a design in her head, she describes it to Ruben, mostly with gestures, and he does sketches that their part-time pattern cutters translate into muslins. Three times a week, Ruben's eighty-year-old father, Vitellio, a retired tailor who once had a carriage-trade clientele in Old Havana, comes in from New Jersey to help. (On the morning I met Señor Toledo, he arrived with a neatly wrapped "present" for Isabel—the lid of her pressure cooker, which he had taken home to repair.) "We're like a big family," Ruben said, "and to work here you have to be comfortable as part of an organism." This cozy hive can produce, at most, only three hundred pieces a season, which are retailed at Barneys, in New York; Ikram, in Chicago; Nordstrom, in Dallas; Colette, in Paris; Joyce, in Hong Kong; and a few other high-end department stores.

The Toledo boutique at Barneys consists of a rack or two opposite the up escalator on the second floor (where Prada and Lanvin occupy the corner salons). On a recent visit, four big drawings by Ruben and a few samples from Isabel's minuscule 2008 Cruise collection were on display. An ingénue's charming dance frock with a fifties silhouette was sprinkled with embroidered pinwheels, in peppery colors, and it came with a little bolero that tied under the bosom. For a more classical taste, there were a couple of modern chitons—soft dresses with Grecian pleating, a Toledo signature—in pewter or black rayon jersey, which you could wear barefoot or to lunch at the George V. The most striking piece was one of Toledo's future great hand-me-downs. It was a short, champagne-colored gown with a fitted waist and a full skirt, constructed entirely of narrow, hand-shirred silk bands seamed into tiers. That kind of demi-couture is not for the bargain hunter, and Toledo's prices range from twelve hundred dollars to ten thousand (for a "coat of armor" in metallic lace). But Julie Gilhart, Barneys' fashion director, told me that the line reliably sells out almost as soon as it appears. "Most of my clientele," Isabel said wryly, but without resentment, "seems to be manufacturers buying the clothes to copy."

The Toledos reckon that in twenty-four years of marriage they have spent, at most, a week apart—when he flew to Japan, ahead of her, for a "fashion opera" whose sets he had designed. As photogenic newlyweds who were fixtures of the downtown club scene and at Studio 54, they gave an interview to *Paper* magazine in which they expressed their desire to have "ten children as soon as possible." They have never had any. ("Not yet," Isabel said, when I asked them about it, to which Ruben objected, with some alarm, "I don't want to share you.") But they are so enmeshed with each other that it's hard to imagine them making the compromises, or dividing the prosaic labors, of parenthood. "I think we don't know which one of us is which," she admitted.

It's obvious, however, that their differences are part of their chemistry. Ruben, who was born in Cuba a year after Isabel, described himself as "a typical street-smart Havana mutt for whom anything goes, while the Spanish side of Isabel loves rules and order." He is "a pack rat," and she hates clutter. His extroverted, Latin gallantry leaves one with a first impression that she, by contrast, is profoundly shy, and even friends call her "unreadable." But her reticence is of a piece with her economy as a designer, and in both cases she has plenty to say, especially to her husband. They go back and forth about art and life, debating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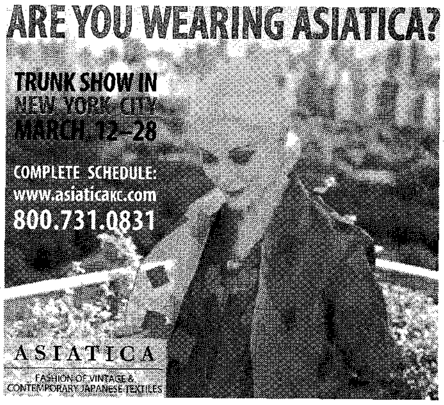
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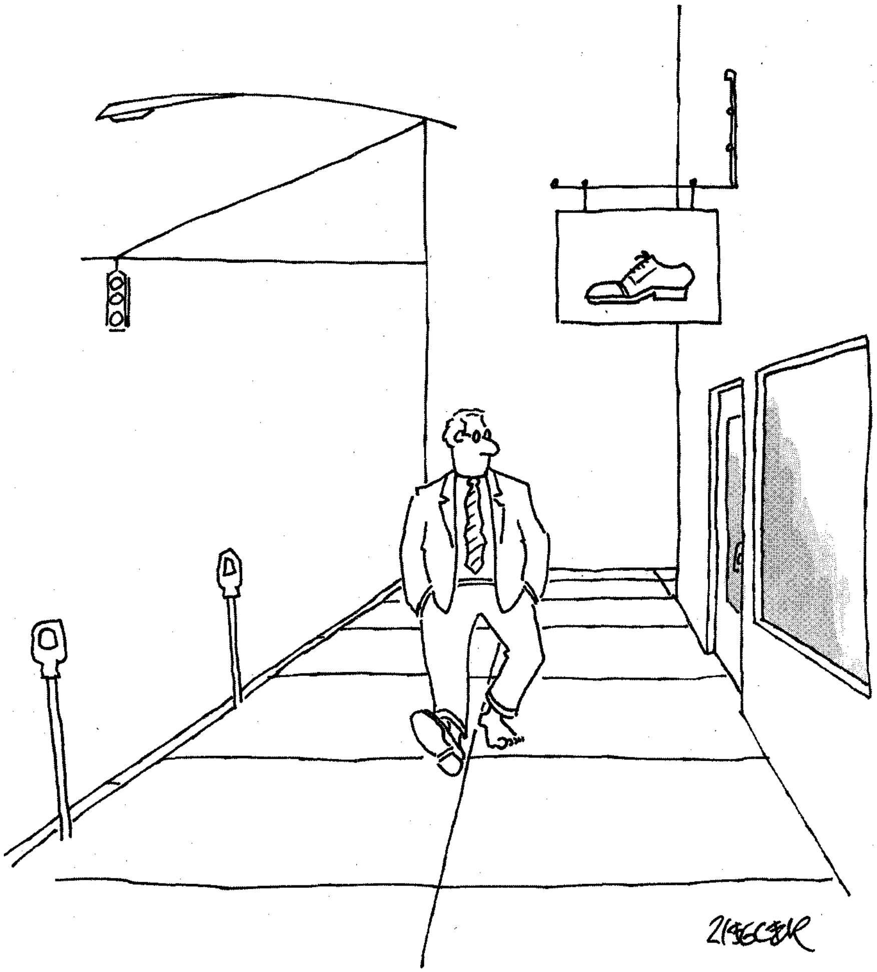

how alike and unalike they are, as if they were exploring the paradoxes of a thrilling new acquaintance. "We always know we can get through to each other," she said, "and that's so sexy." He paints her obsessively ("It's really because I'm always handy"), and their symmetry as a dyad appeals to photographers, among them Karl Lagerfeld. He posed them on giant stools for a portrait that appeared in the catalogue of a joint exhibition in 2000, at the Kent State University Museum. They are about the same height—five and a half feet; both slight and dark (one of their oldest friends, Joey Arias, the performance artist and drag star, describes them as "salt and pepper shakers"); and their weights in the marriage also seem evenly balanced.

West New York, New Jersey, where the Toledos grew up, was a blue-collar barrio with a vibrant Latin culture where thousands of Cuban exiles settled in the nineteen-sixties. Ruben's family arrived on a "freedom flight," in 1967, and he still recalls the white cowboy boots and leopard-skin jacket that he was given by the Salvation Army. "They were my first American clothes, and when everyone stared at me I thought it was because I looked so cool," he said. Isabel's father, Felix Izquierdo, who bore a striking resemblance to Clark Gable (he died three weeks before her wedding), was born in Cuba to parents from the Canary Islands. He went to work, at twelve, as a clerk in a hardware store whose owners eventually gave him a share in the business. He lost it when he emigrated, and took a job operating knitting machines in a textile factory. Eventually, he scraped together enough money to open a clothing shop in Union City. "I loved the no-nonsense way my father dressed," Isabel said. "Menswear has such authority. The only clothes that I ever wear, besides my own, are Ruben's."

Bertha Izquierdo, Isabel's mother, had once been employed at a rich uncle's shoe factory in Camajuani (the provincial town where Isabel was born), selecting leathers. "Cuban women didn't work outside the home, but she wanted to," Ruben said. "It was a modern family, unlike mine, and it seemed like an ideal family, unlike mine—we're solitary people who love each other but fight a lot—and Bertha played the catcher on a women's baseball team." (Spherical skirts or sleeves, seamed with contrasting thread, like a baseball, are among Toledo's leitmotifs.) Isabel recalls an idyllic early childhood in an extended family. Even after the revolution, her resourceful mother managed to dress her three daughters—Isabel is the youngest—"like little princesses." But when they started over, in New Jersey, in 1968, Bertha also got a factory job, assembling airplane-ignition parts, and the girls were sent to a babysitter after school. "I've always been bull-headed," Isabel told me, "and I refused to go. So my mother had to bribe me with the promise of sewing lessons." At first, she practiced on little pillows or stuffed animals, but soon she started sewing for herself. "I was always so skinny that I hated shopping," she said. She often stayed up late into the night making her school clothes, and she also sewed for her sisters. Ruben recalled seeing one of the Izquierdo girls, whom he didn't yet know, at a local dance hall wearing "an amazing dress of white gauze that everyone admired." It was the era of "Saturday Night Fever," and the dress came from a store-bought pattern that Isabel had reworked. Even at the babysitter's kitchen table, she was engrossed by laying out a pattern. It wasn't merely the paper-doll template for a cute outfit or a toy but an abstract puzzle whose multiple solutions were governed, like music, by mysterious laws.

Having met her dress before he met Isabel, Ruben found himself sitting near her in a ninth-grade Spanish class. He was thirteen and she was fourteen, and for him "it was love at first sight." But one afternoon, when Isabel and I were, exceptionally, by ourselves, she told me, "I was a wild girl at that age, wild but innocent. All I cared about was getting dressed up and going dancing. I figured out how to get rides into the city with older boys from the neighborhood, who were glad to take me, because I had the 'look' you needed to get into the clubs—a cross between Lolita and Keith Richards." Hoping to calm her down a bit, Isabel's father

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got her a summer job in a bridal shop. There was a rush order to fill, and she helped out with the bridesmaids' dresses. "But when they were finished I quit, and I wouldn't take any money, which the owner couldn't understand," she said. "By then, I knew that sewing was my vocation, though not that kind of sewing, and I was afraid of being trapped, for life, catering to Bridezillas. That's pretty funny," she concluded, "because catering to Bridezillas in one form or another is the fate of most designers."

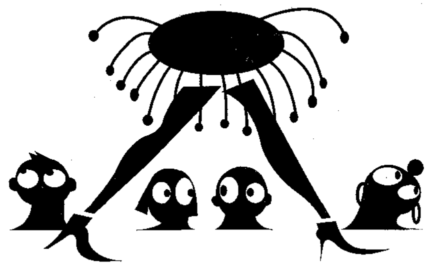
Ruben, in the meantime, contrived to fail both Spanish and art, his mother tongues. "That's because you were already an artist," Isabel said, but she also suggested that his "crush" on her had played a part. "Please don't insult me by calling it a crush," he retorted. "True love isn't a 'crush,' as time has proved."

They started dating when they finished high school, and if Toledo's work had a narrative—which it doesn't, she said vehemently: "I don't need images or fantasy to express emotion through design"—it would surely be that of their romance.

Like their parents, Ruben and Isabel were driven by a desire to assimilate. "That's what makes our work so American," he said. After a semester at the School of Visual Arts, he dropped out and sold used cars, hung out at the Mudd Club, met Andy Warhol, Klaus Nomi, Keith Haring, and other "not great models for good behavior," and eventually got a job as a salesman at Parachute, an edgy boutique in SoHo. (By that time, he was supplementing his income by selling photographs of Isabel, colored with food dye, to the postcard buyer at Fiorucci.) Joey Arias and Kim Hastreiter, the editor of *Paper*, used to drop by. They both remember Ruben talking non-stop about his beautiful girlfriend. Isabel, in the meantime, enrolled at F.I.T., then transferred to Parsons. She dressed for the clubs in bubbles of tulle with fishing-wire straps, and "wearable sculptures" of pulled thread. But in 1979 she quit her studies for a chance to intern with Diana Vreeland at the Met's Costume Institute. "Mrs. Vreeland was fascinated by Isabel's footwear," Ruben noted. "One day she'd be wearing combat boots, and the next granny shoes."

Conservation was not yet the esoteric province of experts in hazmat suits that it has become, and Isabel had few credentials beyond her gifts as a seamstress. She began by working on the institute's old buckram dress forms, reshaping them with cotton batting and surgical mesh, but one day she was handed a gown by Madame Grès that had started to tear, and was told to mend it. "The name meant nothing to me," she said. "I had no idea who all these mythic figures were. I looked at the technique, not at the label, and figured out, from the structure, how it should be repaired. Couture is a language, and I learned it the way a child does, by immersion. Another time, I was restoring a Vionnet, and when I turned it inside out, and saw the seams, I thought, Wow. I knew that the curators were wrong about it. It wasn't, as they said, the bias cut that gave it its shape, but the weight of the fabric."

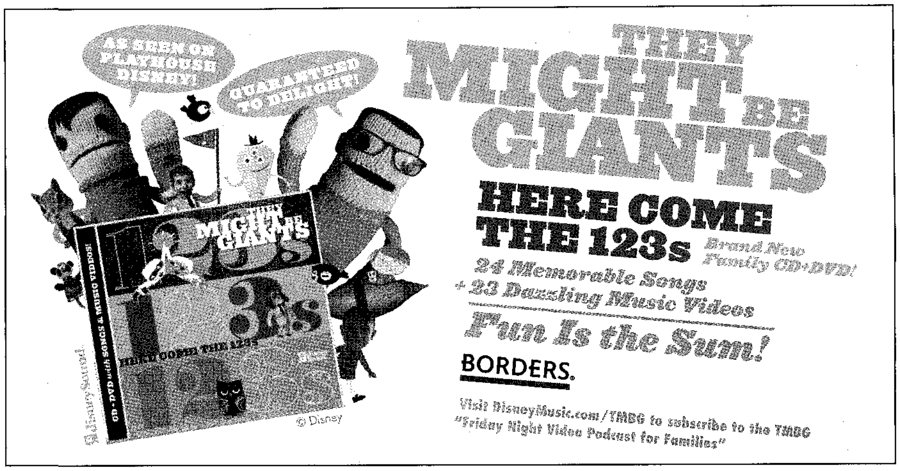
Toledo spent five years at the Met, which were in essence an apprenticeship with the twentieth century's greatest couturiers. In 1985, during Fall Fashion Week, she mounted her first runway show for buyers and the press. (She had been selling her creations on consignment at Fiorucci, and her "pre-collections"—part of chaotic spectacles at Danceteria, where Joey Arias hosted a monthly revue called "Mermaids on Heroin"—had won her an underground following.) At her official début, Toledo presented a collection pieced together from denim wedges in primary colors, which caused a stir and made the windows at Bergdorf's. Harold Koda, who had worked at the Costume Institute as an exhibition assistant when Isabel was an intern (he is now the chief curator), was in the audience. "Isabel's early work challenged the notion of what clothing could be," he said. "She wasn't a militant, like Rei Kawakubo, but her approach struck me as aggressively conceptual in that it asserted the primacy of the pattern over the garment. I have always loved the purity of



her ideas—nothing she does is superficial—and her clothes are fascinating as design objects. But, as the artist evolved and the woman matured, she invested the clothes with a cryptic sensuality in which, I think, you can read Ruben's influence, and that of their marriage. I still remember a dystopian-looking but very beautiful cocoon jacket of rusty-brown organza—the color of a cockroach—lined with what seemed to be the filter of an air-conditioner. It was constructed like a T-shirt pulled over the head backward, and it reminded me of late Balenciaga."

Toledo says that she doesn't channel other designers, though her admirers tend to invoke canonical figures in making a case for her place in the pantheon (besides Charles James, Geoffrey Beene, Vionnet, Claire McCardell, and Bonnie Cashin, contemporaries like Alber Elbaz, of Lanvin, and Azzedine Alaïa are frequently mentioned). "In terms of invention and of blurring the boundaries between art and fashion, Isabel is like a modern-day Schiaparelli," Kim Hastreiter said. Compared with Schiaparelli, a stormy, protean figure who enriched the vocabulary of fashion more than any of her peers, Toledo is, or still is, a minor—and democratic—deity who doesn't seek to dictate the way women should live.

Yet she, too, has a mischievous side, and has always enjoyed testing the limits of what clothing can be. In 1988, she created the "Packing Dress," a flat, white circle with four holes—for the legs, arms, and head. (On the body, it resembles a Surrealist lampshade.) Ten years later, at one of her last runway shows (their expense, in relation to the business they generated, had become prohibitive), she unveiled the "Hermaphrodite," an ethereal confection of droopy pouches, in topaz chiffon, lashed with bias tape, which can be turned inside out, suggesting either an orifice or an appendage, depending on your hormone levels that evening. ("When you wear something for the first time," Isabel said, "it should surprise you with a rush of feeling you weren't expecting"—the ephemeral feeling, perhaps, of being happy with yourself.) But her archives are also full of deceptively straight-looking lace and ruffles; ladylike shirtwaists with a New Look flare; minimalist sheaths cut on the bias;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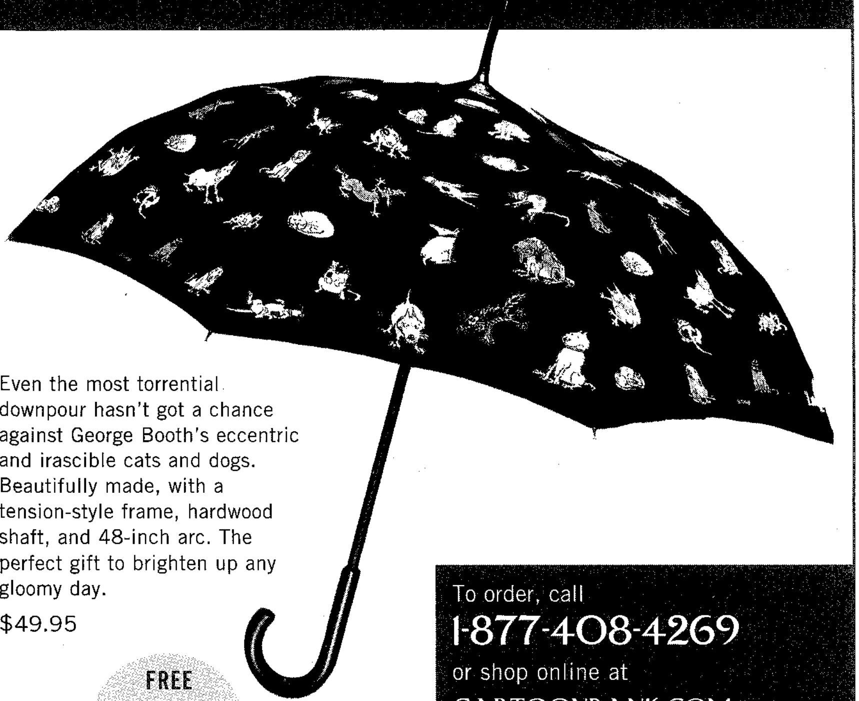

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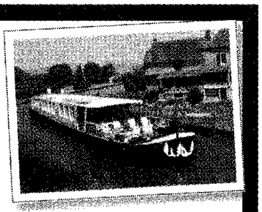

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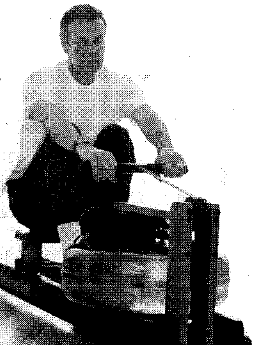

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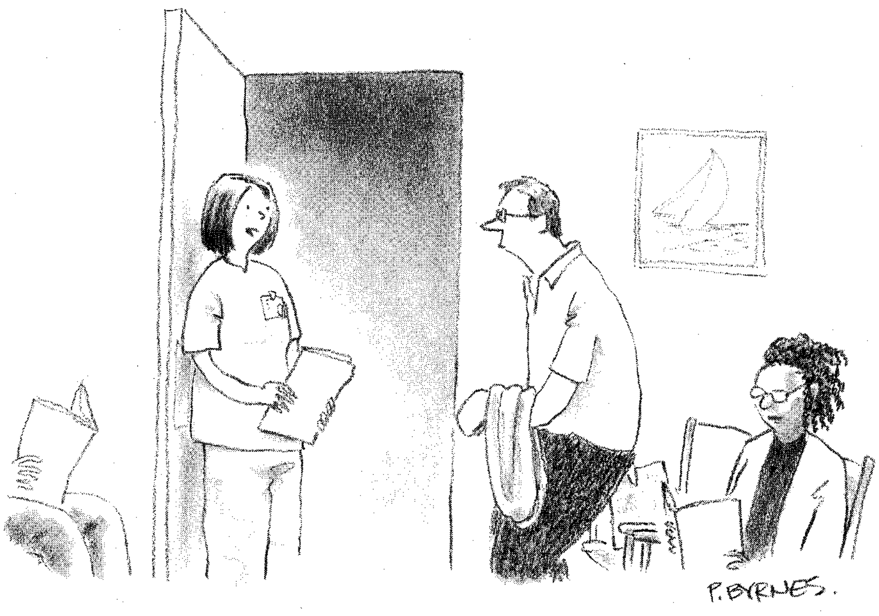
and dress-and-coat ensembles in lavish brocade that flirt with propriety, or even with mumsiness, until you perceive the ironic detail that subverts them. As a woman designer (and her own guinea pig), Toledo thinks about body parts—and flaws—that a man might overlook. “I have a pointy chin,” she said, “so sharp lapels make me look witchy if they're not set properly.” I have a dictator's jaw, so I was very surprised that when I put on a gendarme coat of rubberized silk (it looked like the skin of a wet otter), with a high collar, which Toledo designed at Anne Klein, you would not have mistaken me for Mussolini.

The announcement that Toledo had been hired to create some excitement at Anne Klein heartened the professionals who considered her the rightful heir of Cashin and McCardell—women with an original perspective on American style in a landscape dominated by male designers, many of whom are, today, boy wunderkinds. Anne Klein herself was more of a trendsetter than an artist, but she sensed the nascent feminism of a new generation. A former sketcher on Seventh Avenue, who founded the company in 1968, she liked to say that “clothes aren't going to change the world, the women who wear them will.” She dressed the baby boomers just then beginning to enter the workforce in separates that they could “mix and match”—a novel concept for the time. In 1974, when Klein died of breast cancer, at fifty-one, Donna Karan inherited her mantle and wore it for a decade with panache. (She and her old schoolmate Louis dell'Olio did much of the work on Anne Klein II.) Karan left the year that the Toledos went into business, and, under a series of successors, the brand fell into the doldrums.

Shortly before Toledo joined Anne Klein, its parent company, Jones Apparel, a conglomerate with five billion dollars a year in sales, had been looking for a buyer or for bids from private-equity firms, but had received a low valuation from analysts. The chief executive, Peter Boneparth, was betting that he could reinvigorate a sluggish corporate metabolism from the top down with an injection of charisma. “It wasn't about getting the name who was the biggest,” he told the *Times*, “but the person who had the best perceived talent”—perceived, that is, by the fashion press (which helped to build suspense for Toledo's début) rather than by the moneymen. At her first outing, Fall-Winter 2007, she showed clashing plaids in a smart walking suit, and mixed chunky knits with fluid trousers. There was a confident swagger to the leather and charmeuse. Even though the clothes were designed for production in China (“I was expected to pick out the buttons before I had thought about the clothes,” Toledo said) and she adapted her standards of tailoring to a mass market, some critics felt that the collection fell short of the revelation they had been expecting, or that it was too cerebral for the target audience. “The Anne Klein lady wants a nice red blazer,” an industry expert told me, “but a customer for Isabel's clothes has to be literate in fashion to read their subtlety, and even then it's only fully apparent in a dressing room.” As Koda noted, “There is sometimes a tongue-in-cheek primness to Isabel's work—the sex appeal isn't explicit.” For the sort of woman who dresses at Gucci, or even at Donna Karan, the spirit of the clothes was probably a bit too impeccable. But for Spring 2007 Toledo let her hair down. Ruben hand-painted a bouquet of gossamer shirtwaists, and transparent layers drifted down the runway like a cloud of milkweed on a June day. You could feel a collective surge of appetite from the front row, and the bees and butterflies left buzzing.



“No, the doctor isn't ready for you, but you have been bumped up to the real waiting room.”

Just as Spring was being shipped, and it seemed that a well-loved Cinderella, superior to her rivals yet toiling in obscurity, had been liberated, Jones backed out, without notice or explanation. A corporate shakeup had ousted Boneparth (the terms of his separation agreement do not permit him to comment, he told me), and a new management team, headed by Wesley Card (who declined to answer any questions but issued a two-line statement through a publicist praising Isabel's “amazing talent”), apparently balked at the commitment necessary to launch a designer with far-reaching ambitions—especially one whom it hadn't hired—and decided, in a dismal retail climate, to focus on lower-end brands. Toledo is officially still under contract to Anne Klein, and she won't be at liberty until next year to discuss her experience, except to say that she's “sad and disappointed, and we brought some of our best technicians to Anne Klein, but we're regrouping.”

At one of our last meetings, the Toledos and I went out for lunch at a French bistro near their loft building. (Ruben does an excellent imitation of wounded macho pride if a woman reaches for the check.) It was raining, and I saw that Isabel was staring intently at the umbrellas in a stand near our table. I asked her why. “If you had never seen an umbrella,” she said, “and you had no idea what it was for—if it just looked like a dying lily—could you imagine its shape open?” ♦

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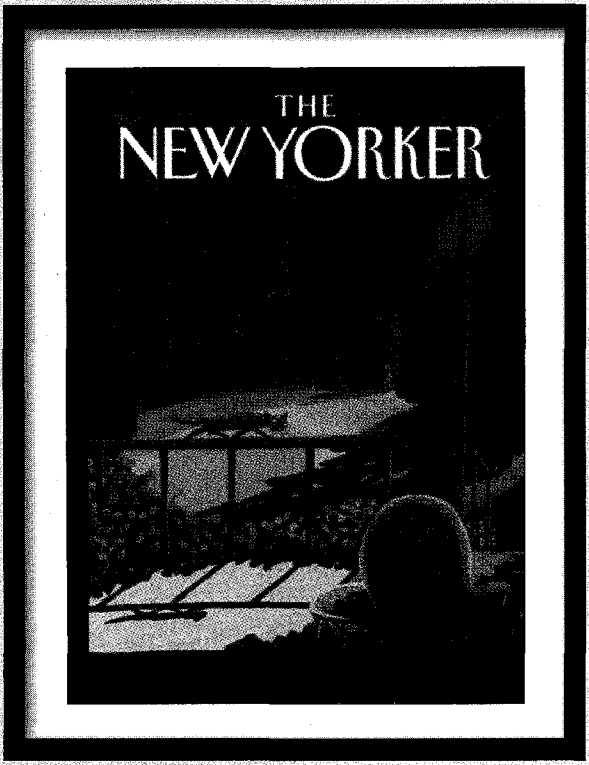

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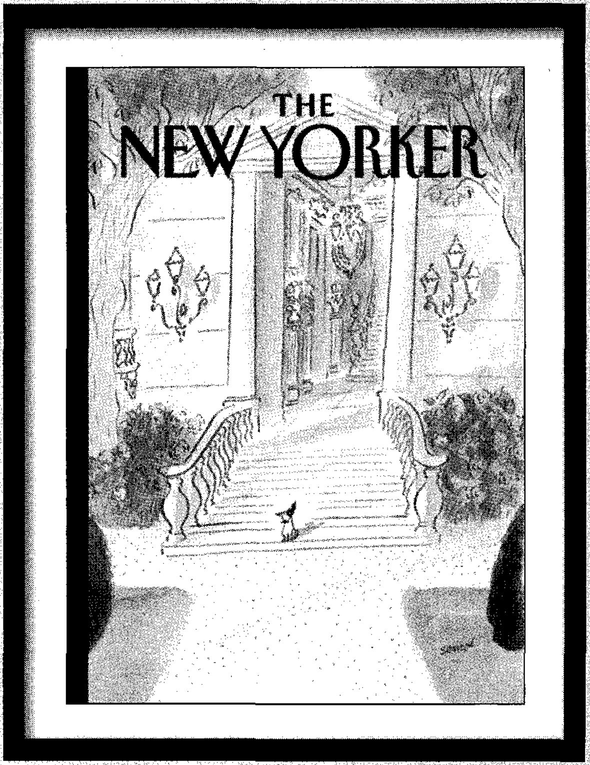

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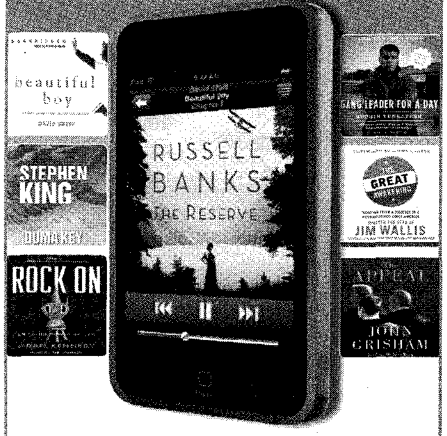

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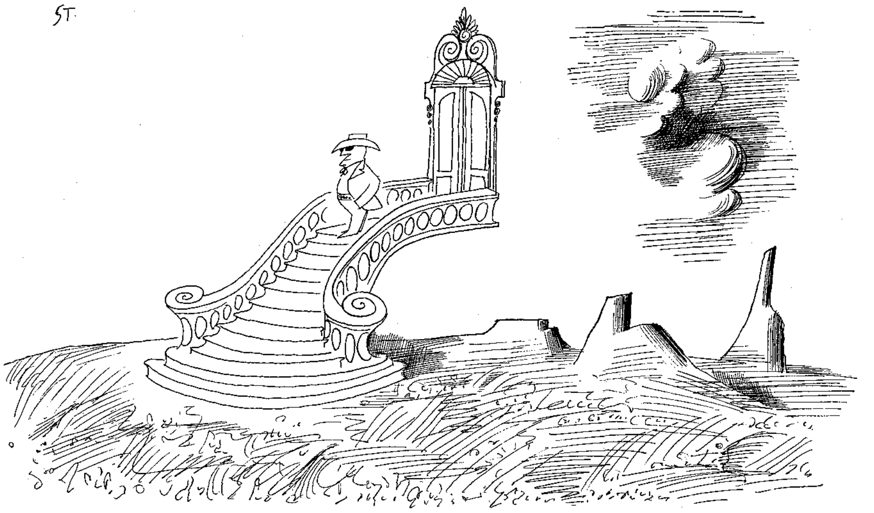
SHOUTS & MURMURS

BY THE FOOT

BY IAN FRAZIER

I feel sorry for people who still think of their places in terms of square feet. My partner, Scott, and I recently purchased Wyoming, which we are in the process of having renovated, and, yes, I do know the square footage (something like two trillion seven hundred and thirty billion square feet, give or take). But that's just not a very practical type of measurement when we're dealing with all the plumbers and contractors and security staff and reporters and other non-wealthy service personnel we have to give instructions to. Nowadays, everybody involved in redoing substantial properties like ours uses Global Transverse Mercator Units (GTMUs), which you get off a satellite feed. GTMUs, we've found, are much more accurate for detail work like wainscoting, and are able to deal with vast alkali flats and so on, too.

Basically, we are looking at this purchase as a tear-down. There's really not a lot here you'd want to keep, except one or two of the Wind River Mountains and some old nineteen-twenties Park Service structures in Yellowstone. Scott and I bought for the location—it's convenient to anywhere, really, if you think about it—and for the simplicity of line. We wanted someplace rectangular, a much easier configuration from a design point of view, and we won't have to fuss with panhandles and changeable riverine property lines where we're going to get into disputes with the landowner next door. Spare us the headaches, please! We've had plenty already, with the former occupants (thank heavens they're gone) and all the junk they left behind—the old broken-down pickup trucks, houses, eyesore water towers, uranium mines, the University of Wyoming, Yellowtail Dam, Casper. I'm a thrower-outer. I believe we must first clear everything away, then see what we've got. Scott is more sentimental. He thinks we should leave the North Platte River, for example, and work around it. I haven't said yes or no. I'm secretly hoping he changes his mind.



SAUL STEINBERG, UNTITLED, 1961, © THE SAUL STEINBERG FOUNDATION

In fact, I get a little crazy when I think about it. I should block this question from my consciousness entirely. The North Platte River is the most ridiculous . . . It's literally "a mile wide and an inch deep." That's literally true. There are these small trickles of water running here and there, kind of a brownish sand stretching in all directions, a few cow footprints, weird little bushes, a rusty car axle sticking up out of the brownish sand. Why would you ever want to hang on to something like that?

I know that he's not really serious. I know this is just a ploy to get back at me for insisting on separate bathrooms and then taking first pick. For mine, I chose Johnson and Sheridan Counties, and he's in a silent rage because his bathroom will be a couple of counties that are a short drive down the interstate, that's all. Nothing, nothing puts a strain on a relationship like redoing a home.

Forgive me if I've neglected to introduce myself. My name is on the card that you were given earlier. You'll note that both my first and last names are blacked out; feel free to use a thick black line when referring to either of them. Scott, of course, is a pseudonym, for personal reasons not disclosed. The so-called Scott and I request that all media coverage refrain from any mention of us in connection with the recently purchased real estate described above. This is a privacy issue and goes to the heart of us not wanting you to know. The electrified double fencing along the border of South Dakota and the other still existing neighbor states makes the intended point as well, we trust.

Will our new digs be costly to heat in the winter and air-condition in the summer? Yes, absolutely. What about problems of sewage and toxic runoff? That will all go to Colorado. Who will handle waste disposal? You, the taxpayer. What about trespassers inadvertently crossing our property lines? Of course, we expect all transcontinental passenger and military flights to detour around our yard and not cut across. That's just common courtesy. All pilots, I think, should be aware that when they approach certain latitudinal and longitudinal coördinates they are entering a private residence. A little consideration here, please.

I guess there's not much more you need to know. As I revisit some of my earlier statements having to do with our personality conflicts involving the North Platte River and so on, I want all that taken out. Internal matters of that kind are outside the bounds of what needs to be talked about here. We have really a lot of money—that is the essential point, so let's stick to just describing that. "A lot" doesn't even convey it, because people will think in ordinary terms of "a lot," which is misleading. The total (if I even knew it) is like a lot, a lot, a lot, times even a huge amount more than that. It's almost frustrating not to be able to get this across.

Sometimes I use the living-room metaphor. Your living room—and it doesn't matter who "you" are, because "you" could be anybody, except for a handful of people like me—the living room you are most familiar with, in your own house, is (to me) inconceivably small, of course.

All right. Now imagine the people whom I feel sorry for, mentioned previously, stuck in the old "square feet" paradigm; imagine, further, that I run into them in Davos or somewhere, and they start boring me with talk about their fabulous "walk-in" closets, the ones that are the size of your living room. Do you see? Isn't it clear that this would drive me and anyone close to me absolutely insane? When all the closets in our new place will be constructed to provide fly-through access for helicopters or bush aircraft? Can you see how hard it is for me to keep pretending that we're talking about the same thing?

I believe you do know what I mean. Yes—I sense that you do understand me, and in a very deep and visceral way. Listen, I like your style. Though you're a member of the media, you comport yourself in a manner that is pleasing to me. I'll even go one better—I want to hire you to come and work for my company, or whatever it is that I do. Tell me what they're paying you and I'll third it.

I'm sorry, I must've misheard you. "No"? Did I hear "no"? Who the hell do you think you are? Why, I'll make sure you never work in this quadrant of the universe again. Oh, so now you want to reconsider my offer, do you? Lucky for you I'm a forgiving person. Very well. You start tomorrow morning. I'll expect you in my office at six-forty-five—that's down the hall, around the buttes, first sky-high triumphal archway on your right. Knock twice and leave your shoes on the Divide. ♦

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ON AND OFF THE AVENUE

TECH STUFF

What will the latest gadgets replace in your life?

BY PATRICIA MARX

Shortly before Valentine's Day, a study was released claiming that forty-seven per cent of men in Britain would give up sex in return for a big-screen plasma television (Pioneer PDP-5080HD, at B&H Photo-Video, 420 Ninth Avenue, at 34th Street; $2,195). As with all matters relating to technology, numbers are key: precisely how long were these men prepared to go without sex? And how large a screen? (Answers: six months; fifty inches.) The survey was conducted by an electronics retailer, but, even so, I'm beginning to think that Freud may not have got it just right when he proposed that human beings were motivated chiefly by only two psychic drives.

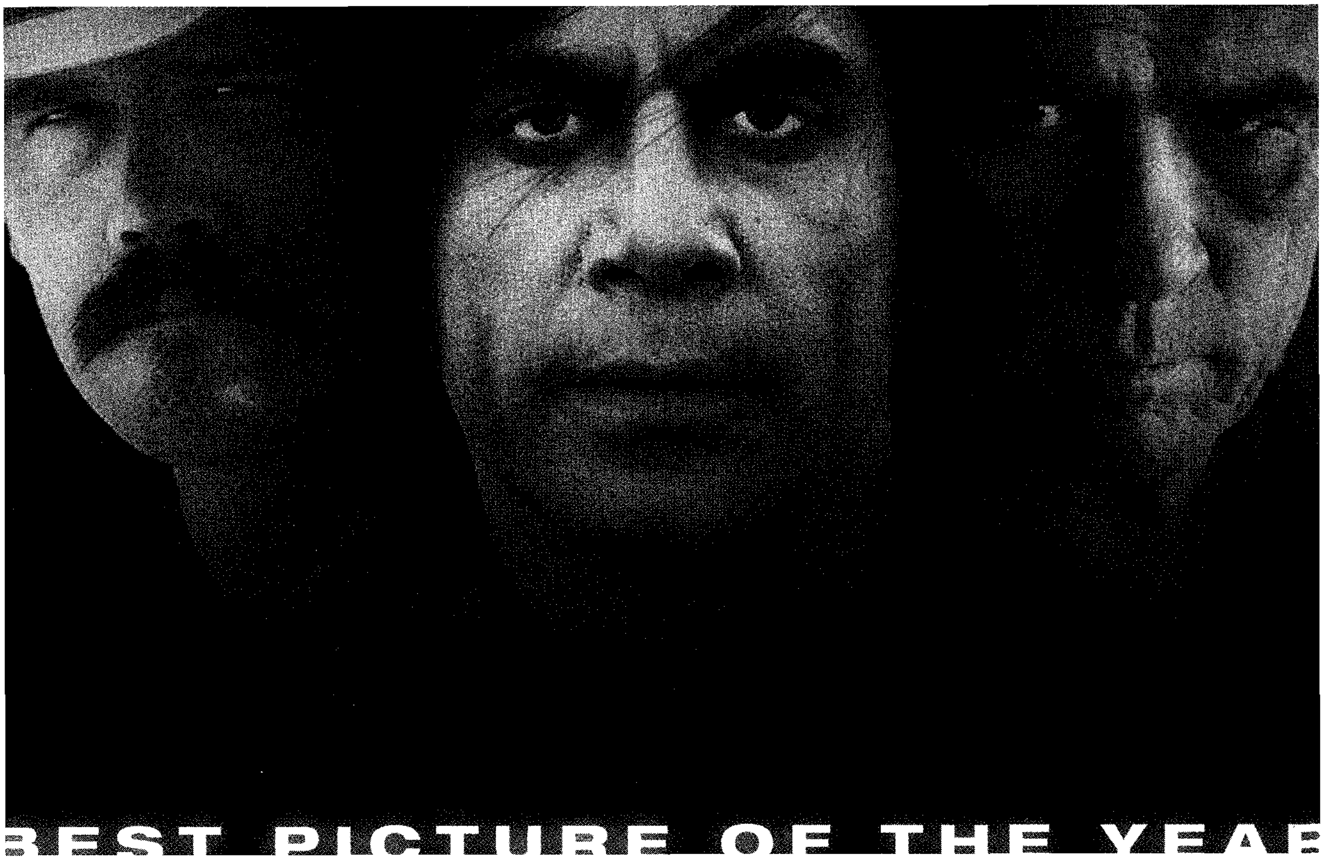
PHILIPPE PETIT-ROULET

Although I might sacrifice a not insignificant toe before agreeing to live without e-mail, I am not what you would call a tech geek. I don't have a page on Facebook (which should really be called EverythingYouWantedToKnowAboutYourKidButWereAfraidToAskBook), and my cell phone is as basic as they come. It was a gift from Paul, the C.T.O. of our household. My phone, the Motorola Motofone F3, was developed for illiterate populations in emerging countries, and is therefore not only cheap; it also has exceptional reception and shockingly long battery life, and is simple to use, thanks to its big buttons and voice prompts. Paul says that the Motofone was built to be nearly impossible to destroy with dirt, dust, or rain, but that doesn't mean that I can't try. (It's $34.99 at J & R, 23 Park Row, it's unlocked, and no service plan is needed.)

A friend who not long ago upgraded to an iPhone told me that I absolutely cannot live without one, either. (At A.T. & T., multiple locations, it's $399-$499, and requires a two-year plan.) This was not the first time I'd encountered the ferocious brand loyalty of a happy tech consumer. Nobody goes around proclaiming that she wears only Prada, and that if you know what's good for you you will, too (well, maybe Miuccia Prada does); most people want to dress sui generis. It's different with gadgets. (Incidentally, last year Prada came out with an elegant piano-lacquer black phone, which, like the iPhone, has touch interface and can play video and audio; the LG KE850 Prada Phone is $479.99, unlocked.)

The most Hare Krishna-fied are the Apple devotees. They can be found, day and night, at the company's pristine, thirty-two-thousand-square-foot temple in the meatpacking district (401 W. 14th Street), in search of enlightenment. Around midnight on a recent Saturday, the place was packed with kids who should have been out drinking and making trouble but instead were scrutinizing cables (XtremeMac XtremeHD; $19.95). Not far from the spiral glass staircase, a saleschild took a break from executing ballet poses to show me a MacBook Pro ($1,999-$2,799). "Let's look at word processing, because that's what you said you're actually into," he said. He pushed a button on the shiny, inch-thin object, and, *whoosh*, a term paper titled "Botany" appeared on the screen. "A cool, fun thing is that if you're just waking up, maybe in the morning, you can have it pop up your school schedule in one of the windows!"

By contrast, the Fifth Avenue Apple Store, in midtown, feels almost geriatric—some of the people milling around, I think, might be as old as thirty-seven. Don't they have anything better to do on a Saturday at 2 A.M.? I, on the other hand, must have a look at the just released MacBook Air notebook to find out why everyone is saying that this silver sliver, 0.76 inches at its thickest point, 0.16 at its thinnest, is the greatest thing since melba toast ($1,799-$3,098). Everyone, that is, except for the ones who complain that when it lost bulk it


BEST PICTURE OF THE YEAR

also lost speed and capacity. John, the laid-back sales dude, agrees with both the fans and the critics, and therefore recommends a MacBook Air only if size and weight are your biggest concerns.

Some people who love Macs but do not love the antiseptic vibe of the Apple outposts swear by Tekserve (119 W. 23rd Street), which is to the Apple store as a deli counter is to Le Bernardin. It is furnished with comfy old chairs, an antique soda machine that dispenses ten-cent Cokes, a gigantic aquarium, and rows of vintage Macs, and it is staffed by a grunge-loving band of employees. "I like Tekserve the store, but not Tekserve the smell," Matt Stine, a twenty-seven-year-old music producer, told me recently. "Those guys are just too cool for soap." Tekserve can recover data not only from crashed computers but from iPods, digital cameras, and U.S.B. flash drives. The fee is based on the storage size of the device, not on how much you cry.

According to Apple acolytes, Macs are really, really user-friendly. If, however, you have enough friends already or if your hobbies include overclocking your C.P.U., installing case mods, and customizing your computer so that it can, say, wash the dishes, then a P.C. is more your speed. You can pick up a perfectly decent laptop for $499 (Dell Inspiron Laptop, at Dell.com), or, if you prefer a desktop model encased in twenty-four-karat gold with tempered glass panels through which you can watch purple liquid coolant percolate, then splurge on a special-edition Voodoo Omen (voodoopc.com; approximately $35,000).

The Lenovo (né I.B.M.) ThinkPad laptop is a trusty piece of hardware except when it falls into my hands. A few years ago, I spilled a litre of Diet Coke on my T43 (lenovo.com; the updated T61 model starts at $948). It was three in the morning, and I called the tech-support line for help. "May I ask you a personal question?" the technician said. I had mentioned that, being a writer, I was anxious about my computer breaking, and so I figured she was going to ask me if I would read her script. "Sure," I said, with some dread. "Are you on medication?" she asked. A day and a half later, a new keyboard arrived. Anyone who foresees a lot of spillage and droppage in her future should look into the indestructible Panasonic Toughbooks, which come in three categories—Business-Rugged, Semi-Rugged, and Fully-Rugged, referring, perhaps, to the dress codes of their respective owners ($1,600-$4,000).

I've never seen your place, but if it's bigger than mine it might please you to know that the Logitech MX Revolution cordless mouse can maneuver a cursor from up to thirty feet away (newegg.com; $79.99). Even people with modest apartments, though, will appreciate the Logitech's astonishingly smart and fast free-spinning scroll wheel. Or perhaps you'd like to wear your mouse on your index finger, like a ring? (Flexii Finger 3D USB, vavolo.com; $12.50.) Or wash it under a faucet? (Belkin.com, $29.99.)

WHERE STEEL WOOL COMES FROM
Kanin

Mice—the computer kind—are regularly dissected at the Sony Wonder Technology Lab (Madison Avenue and 56th Street), and kids are welcome to watch. (The next public surgery will take place on March 22nd, 2 to 4 P.M., and it's free.) Afterward, head across the atrium to the cavernous Sony Style Store. I left my spiral notebook there near a bright-red laptop so shiny it looked as if it had been candied (VAIO Notebook; $999.99), and when I returned to look for it a perplexed clerk finally asked, "You mean an actual paper pad?"

Needless to say, I'm not qualified to determine which computer suits your needs, and, in that regard, I am not unlike many of the know-nothing salesclerks at Best Buy, Circuit City, P.C. Richard and Son, and RadioShack (all in various locations, usually across the street from one another). Before setting foot in any of these chain stores, which do indeed have terrific prices, I recommend educating yourself online at pcworld.com and pcmag.com. Or visit Datavision (445 Fifth Avenue, at 39th) or RCS Experience (575 Madison Avenue, at 56th), where the clerks tend not to be lunkheads.

When teen-age girls window-shop these days, they don't linger longingly outside shoe boutiques or record stores. They cluster, sighing, noses pressed against the glass, in front of cell-phone stores. But few of these devices will ever be used for talking. The real purpose of a phone, as everyone knows, is texting. Only techno-tards make actual phone calls—unless they need to lie. Not long ago, I heard a man who was squeezing tomatoes at the grocery store say to someone who'd called him on his titanium BlackBerry Curve 8310 (A.T. & T.; $249.99, with a two-year plan) that he couldn't talk for a few days because he was in the hospital, about to have a procedure done.

Otherwise, mobile phones are useful when you want to look as if you were doing something important—the same purpose that riffling through the cards in your wallet had in the olden days. Or they are for games. "The phone I would like the most," my eleven-year-old nephew, Dylan, informed me in an e-mail, "is the Voyager because it has a full keyboard and a touchscreen, which are definitely my two favorite things and you can watch TV on it will you possibly buy me one? and also you can play music." (The LG Voyager VX10000 is $299.99 at Verizon, with a two-year plan.)

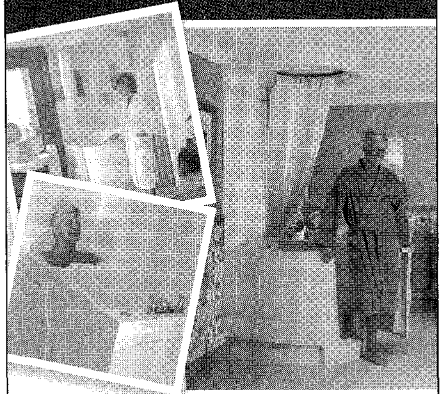
Phones now have names like Heat, Chocolate, Rumor, BlackJack, Shine, Tilt, Pearl, and Wing, all of which sound like prophylactics, for what reason I do not know. Nor do I know how much you will pay for your phone, because that figure is determined by a God who plays dice with the price wheel and various calling plans. Whatever you pay, though, is guaranteed to be more than you would have yesterday or will tomorrow, and much more than people in other Zip Codes pay. At least you will not pay as much as any of the suckers who are planning to jet over to Japan and snatch up one of the few soon-to-be-released phones from Tiffany & Co. In a clamshell case encrusted with four hundred diamonds, they will retail for about $94,000.

Let's say you find yourself in a dimly lit bistro, and you feel like working on your novel, but all you have is your smartphone, and your thumbs are getting fatigued. Hooray! You can compose Chapter 3 on your placemat, thanks to the Bluetooth Virtual Keyboard, a three-and-a-half-inch gizmo that projects a functional, full-sized QWERTY onto any flat surface (at thinkgeek.com, for $149.99, and it works with a P.D.A., too).

Some people would be well advised to trade in their cell phones as soon as possible for an LP4100, a.k.a. the Breathalyzer Phone, which can be set to block you from calling that schmo if your blood-alcohol level registers higher than .08. This item, a best-seller in Korea, where approximately a hundred thousand "replacement drivers" work on call, serving customers who are too drunk to drive home, is not yet available here.

Between eight and nine thousand people a day are said to visit B & H Photo-Video, a seventy-thousand-square-foot emporium of camera, audio, and video equipment, along with computers, binoculars, telescopes, and sundry cut-rate goods. My theory? It's the same batch of visitors, and they are looking for the exit. The one item that this place carries only a very limited selection of is the very thing you need in order to shop here—a G.P.S. Venture forth anyway—through the anti-theft detectors by the front door and past the hefty fake tree that must wonder what it's doing entwined under the conveyor belts that hug the ceiling to transport purchases to the checkout line. Follow the bold black-on-yellow signs that point to the camera department, up the escalator, on the second floor, pausing to admire the Eye-Fi, a memory card that will wirelessly send photographs from your camera to your computer ($99.99), so that you can transmit them onto the digital picture frame that you gave your grandmother who lives far away, except that you can't, because neither you nor she has been able to figure out its touch-sensitive control buttons (Digital Spectrum NuTouch NT700; $169.95). Help yourself to a complimentary pretzel rod and a cup of kosher cola, then join the long yet fast-moving line until it is your turn to consult with one of the salesclerks. The sales force is made up largely of Hasidic males dressed in forest-green vests, white shirts, and black trousers, all of whom, in my limited experience, seem more interested in educating customers than in making a sale—even suggesting, as Yehuda, in the computer department, did, that I hunt around online for a better price. What I learned at B & H was that if you want to kill the afternoon ask a Nikon person why Nikons are better than Canons, or vice versa. As a nonpartisan, I will tell you that if you're after a point-and-shoot you can't go wrong with either the Canon Powershot SD1000, for $169.95 (advantage: a viewfinder), or the Nikon Coolpix S200 (advantage: image stabilization), for $149.95. "The Canon makes you look better," the salesman at the next perch said, clinching the argument.

If a drum is thwacked in an apartment, and the cranky lady downstairs cannot hear it, does it make a sound? Affirmative. The Ion digital drum comes with eight drum pads and can record and play back your beats. And, best of all for everyone but you (no offense), you listen through headphones, so only the noisemaker hears the noise (thinkgeek.com; $99.99). But what if you want to be Art Tatum or a string quartet? The concert-grand sound-alike Roland FP-7 digital piano has a remarkably authentic-feeling progressive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"What makes people wear clogs?"

• •

hammer action and a damper pedal that supports half-pedalling, and it can simulate a very fine Steinway when the lid is up, down, or anywhere in between (Sam Ash, 160 W. 48th Street; $1,595).

The era of silent barbecuing, on the other hand, may be over. The George Foreman iGrill has a built-in amplifier, audio jack, and stereo input cable for your iPod or MP3 player (newegg.com; $129.99). May I suggest that the "Sweeney Todd" soundtrack not be queued up first on your playlist (Amazon.com; $18.99)?

Never let it be said that the modern inanimate object doesn't pull its weight. The Ambient Forecasting Umbrella has a handle embedded with electronics that make it glow and pulse depending on whether precipitation is likely. And the WiFi Detector Shirt is emblazoned with a diagram whose signal-strength bars light up when you're near a hotspot (thinkgeek.com; $99.99 and $29.99). If only H. G. Wells were alive, he could teach us how to use all these gadgets.

Mark Hernandez, a spiffy fellow in his late thirties, had been toiling on Wall Street, coming up with, as he jokingly put it, creative ways to steal money from Latin America, when, in 2004, he called it quits to start CLIQK, a "digital-life-style-services firm" that serves as a sort of technology architect, converting the co-ops and summer houses of the rich into places that James Bond would be proud to call home. A television recessed in the ceiling automatically flips down like a trapdoor, movable panels fly out from the walls of your open-plan loft to create instant bedrooms, cameras in your refrigerator relay images to your office computer so you know whether you're out of Martini olives, stock quotes flash onto your bathroom mirror as you shave, and a P.C. on the front of the microwave entertains you with YouTube so you don't get bored while the latte heats up (241 Centre Street, 212-941-5080; projects range from $30,000 to $500,000, and, if you want to spend more money, that can be arranged).

The Starry Night Sleep Technology Bed, named, I suppose, for that excellent sleeper Vincent van Gogh, looks like two mattresses plopped into a beige Ultrasuede amoeba. It is still a prototype, but when it is available it will come with a headboard projector that shoots pictures onto a wall across the room; an iPod docking station; a surround-sound system that rises up from the headboard and footboard and stores up to four hundred thousand songs; an Internet connection; two thermostats, so that each side of the bed can be set to a different temperature; and anti-snore technology that detects body vibration and then adjusts the angle of the mattress—and a remote control to regulate it all (starrynightbed.com; $20,000- $50,000).

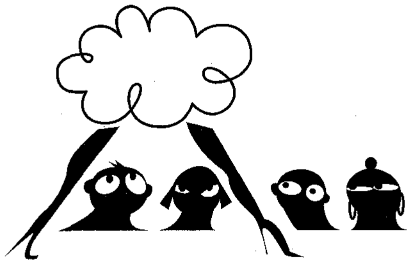
Congratulations. You, but especially I, now require the kindness of an eight-year-old or Paul to turn on the television, let alone the living-room lights. This may be the first generation of children who are better qualified to survive in the world than their parents, especially if survival depends on maneuvering loyal droids to fire ranged weapons using a nunchuck. You don't know what a nunchuck is? Neither do I, but there are a lot of these sophisticated Wii controllers, including the Nyko Wireless Nunchuck ($34.99), at Nintendo World (10 Rockefeller Plaza), a two-story space where kids can not only play Super Mario Galaxy and Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess but Wii-dle their parents into buying them backpacks, toys, and clothes based on the games (woollen Wii beanie and Legend of Zelda T-shirt; $9.99 and $12.99, respectively).

Grownups like to play, too. "Win-Brickout and Tetris variants are perfect if you want to do something while you pretend to listen on the phone," one adult told me. Games designed for the newish Nintendo DS and the Wii, perhaps because they are quirkier and easier to learn and are often simulacra of real-life sports like tennis and bowling, seem to have sucked in a growing number of old people (AMF Bowling Pinbusters and Gamestop, at various locations; $19.99). Maybe that's why I recently read a study claiming that surgeons who play Marble Mania perform better in the operating room.

If you are a retro gamer, you will be happier than a joystick at Video Games New York (202 E. 6th Street), one of the few outlets on the East Coast that stock vintage games, according to a clerk named Jessie, who, at twenty-three, is the same age as the Nintendo Entertainment System ($89.99, refurbished). Some customers, she said, will not have anything to do with games that came out later than the mid-nineties, and for those purists there is, for instance, Virtual Boy, released in 1995 as the first console ever to display 3-D graphics (approximately $200, when available). To play, you place your head inside rubber goggles attached to the front of the game—at least, I think it's a game, but it could be evaluating my eyes for new reading glasses.

What ever happened to reading, anyway? No matter that I can barely make my way through the table of contents of a magazine these days; I am still confident that I will finish every volume of Trollope and run out of reading material by the time the elevator reaches the lobby. That's why I love my Amazon Kindle, the new e-book reader that is lighter and thinner than an average paperback and can store hundreds of books plus a dictionary and access to Wikipedia. A user can choose among a hundred thousand or so books (plus magazines and blogs) available from Amazon—most for about $10—and can download them easily from almost anywhere. There are also tens of thousands of free e-books available for download from sites like Project Gutenberg. The other afternoon, I found myself on a bus stuck in traffic, and so I whipped out my Kindle and started reading a magazine piece about the decline of reading in America. Despite the glaring sunshine, the text was very easy on the eyes, as was the size of the print, which is adjustable. It was like flipping through a magazine—in other words, I didn't finish the article.

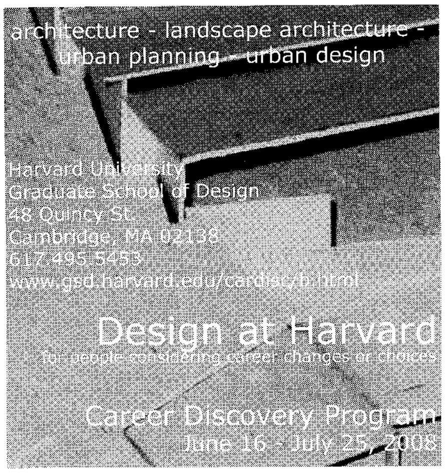
You know those times when you just can't be bothered to look something up on Google? That's why I like Kindle NowNow. Type any question into your device, and, within ten minutes, you will have an answer from a human being. In the course of the next day, three or four other chatty researchers will have weighed in, replying to both your Kindle and your e-mail. I asked, among other things, whether someone with a learner's permit from New York could drive with supervision in Minnesota (yes) and what is the strangest question they'd been asked: "Why don't cities use coffee grounds instead of salt to melt ice?"; "Is it slutty to wear a thong on a first date?"; and a slew of questions about the Turkish stock market. (At Amazon.com for $399, but currently sold out.)



The Pleo, a robotic baby Camarasaurus-dinosaur toy, roughly the same size as a MacBook Air and almost as artificially intelligent (ugobe.com; $349), is not recommended for children under eight, which is too bad, because they may be the only ones who want to play with the thing. Tickle, caress, feed, sing to, startle, or shun this critter and it will respond accordingly. Because it has a memory, its personality will be shaped by what kind of parent you are, though it is unclear whether, years down the line, you will have to pay its shrink bills. You may find Pleo to be the most uncannily adorable creature you've ever encountered. Or you may, as I did, take the side of the asteroid, ice age, volcano, or whatever it was that smothered the terrestrial reptiles in the Mesozoic Era.

Actually, I already have an android in my life: the Roomba, my robotic vacuum cleaner (J & R; $149-$299), which ricochets over carpets and wood floors on its own. I am waiting for the day that it will survey the mess, chortle, and Roomba out the door. In the meantime, I am putting up my feet and enjoying nature—on my great big new TV (Sony Bravia KDL-40XBR4, abesofmaine.com; $1,839.55). David Attenborough's documentary "Planet Earth" may well be the most spectacular footage ever shot (Amazon.com; $54.95) and sure to leave you disappointed by the real thing if you ever venture outside. It's essential that you watch this nine-hour program in a version that has optimal picture resolution, which means that you'll need a high-definition player. (Sony PlayStation 3 plays Blu-ray disks; at Best Buy, it's $399.)

The other day, as I was trying to finish this column, my computer crashed, and, as usual, I went crying to Paul for help. Our routine begins with a lecture about the importance of backing up your files and ends with him coming to my rescue after I promise that this time I really will change my ways. But, after the latest hard-drive tragedy, he suggested a new gadget that might be just right for me, because it is so simple to use, almost impossibly lightweight, cheap, not likely to break, comes with an ingenious built-in delete function, and can handle any language. Yes, the pencil. ◆



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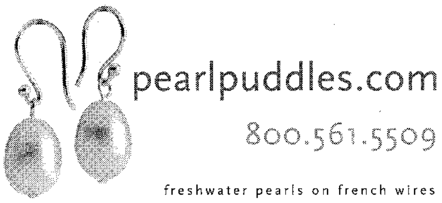

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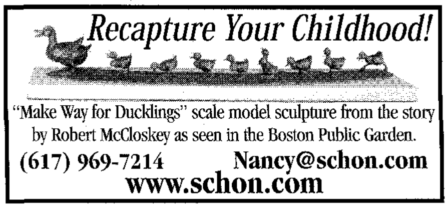

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THE OTHER OBAMA

Michelle Obama and the politics of candor.

BY LAUREN COLLINS

One January afternoon at the University of South Carolina's Children's Center, in Columbia, Michelle Obama scrunched her five-eleven frame into a small white wooden rocking chair. The state's Democratic primary, which her husband, Barack, needed badly to win, was in forty-eight hours. Obama picked up a picture book, flared her nostrils, and began sniffing noisily, in the manner of a bear foraging in the woods for dinner.

"Boom! Boom! Boom!" she read to a group of preschoolers. "The bear will tromp through the forest on his big hungry feet and"—sniff, sniff, sniff—"find that strawberry, no matter where it's hidden."

The kids burst into giggles. Obama picked up another book, from the "Olivia" series.

"I have Olivia in my four-year-old class!" one boy yelled.

"Is she a friend of yours?" Obama asked.

"Yes."

"Is *she* a pig?"

Soon, the story was over. "Let's see," Obama said. "Maybe we have a special guest who will read to us."

She got up from the rocking chair and walked over to a set of French doors. "It's Cocky!" the kids shouted as Obama threw open the doors to welcome an enormous red rooster, dressed in a U.S.C. basketball jersey. She flung her arms around Cocky to give him a hug, a gesture somewhat thwarted by his plush potbelly. "Cocky! Let's read one book together with Cocky."

Obama selected another book and held it up to Cocky's beak. "Here you go, Cocky. Can you read?"

"Cocky, I love you!" a kid screamed.

Sharing the stage with a large, fuzzy piece of poultry might have daunted a more delicate sort of aspiring First Lady, but Obama took her eclipse by Cocky with the seen-it-all aplomb of one of the human characters on "Sesame Street." That day, she was wearing a pair of high-waisted pin-striped sailor pants, a gray cashmere sweater, and a strand of pearls, but, though she is stylishly appointed, she is not dainty. She is often called "regal"—whether in *The New Republic* or in *Glamour*—but her bearing is less royal than military: brisk, often stone-faced (even when making jokes), mordant.

Obama works out like "a gladiator," a friend has said. When people—they're almost always shorter—ask her to pose for pictures, instead of bending her knees she leans at the waist, like the Tin Man. Her winningly chipmunk-cheeked smile is doled out sparingly, a privilege to be earned, rather than an icebreaker or an entreaty. Obama, who graduated from Princeton, earned a law degree from Harvard, and became, first, a corporate lawyer and, more recently, the vice-president for community and external affairs at the University of Chicago Hospitals, spent all but the first year of her childhood in a four-room bungalow on Chicago's South Side. Having traversed vast landscapes of race and class, often as a solo traveller, she evinces the discipline and, occasionally, the detachment of an Army brat. She can seem aloof from politics. Her mother and her older brother both say that she has never once phoned them in tears.

Obama is cool in temperament. When Stevie Wonder, whom she was escorting to the stage at a rally in February, tripped on a riser, sending her tumbling down next to him in front of thousands of people, she exhibited no embarrassment or alarm, turning what could have been a blooper-reel nightmare into a non-event. She is unquestionably accomplished, but she is not a repressed intellectual, in the mode of Teresa Heinz Kerry. More than anything, she seems to enjoy talking about her husband and her daughters (Malia, nine, and Sasha, six). She can give the impression, in the midst of the campaign's endless roundtables and kaffeeklatsches, that she'd rather be talking *to* them. Obama seems like an iconoclast precisely because she's normal (the norm for a candidate's wife having been defined, in the past, as nonworking, white, and pious about the democratic process).

Obama is also cool in the other sense of the word; her tastes, references, and vocabulary—"freaky," "24/7," "got my back," "American Idol," Judge Mathis—if not exactly edgy, are recognizable, which, for a political spouse, makes them seem radical. Of the Iowa State Fair's corn dogs and candied apples, obligingly gushed over by hopeful First Ladies every four years: "Stuff on a stick." Here's Obama, talking to me in her motorcade halfway between Sheboygan, Wisconsin, and Green Bay about Obama Girl, the young woman who professed her crush on Obama's husband all over the Internet: "That was a little weird, because, you know . . . I just assumed, you know, there's no way anybody's gonna hear about that. And one day Sasha comes home and she's, like, 'Daddy has a girlfriend. It's you, Mommy.' And it's, like, 'Oh, shhhhhhhhh—yeah.' " Curse word averted, barely.

Her lack of pretense has made her popular with the portion of the electorate, and the media, for whom prim Laura Bush seems out of touch. Cindy Moelis, who has known Obama since they worked together in Chicago's city hall, in the nineties, told me, "I've actually had girlfriends call me and go, 'You're so lucky. If I'd only met her fifteen years ago, I bet we would be best friends.' " "Can Michelle Obama Be First Lady No Matter What?" pleaded the headline for a post on Wonkette, the political blog, about a gathering of candidates' wives. "Please don't get all Botoxed and start

Obama's pride chafes at being asked to make herself seem duller and less independent than she is. Photograph by Chris Hondros.

acting like some sort of Stepford wife. Please?" the post went on, remarking approvingly on what it termed the " 'bitch, please' look" that Obama had seemed unable to suppress in the wake of a comment by Ann Romney.

It's not that Obama doesn't know the anodyne, wifely things to say (essentially, nothing). She is, after all, a "community and external affairs" professional. But her pride visibly chafes at being asked to subsume her personality, to make herself seem duller and less independent than she is, even in the service of getting her husband elected President of the United States. In Wisconsin, I asked her if she was offended by Bill Clinton's use of the phrase "fairy tale" to describe her husband's characterization of his position on the Iraq War. At first, Obama responded with a curt "No." But, after a few seconds, she affected a funny voice. "I want to rip his eyes out!" she said, clawing at the air with her fingernails. One of her advisers gave her a nervous look. "Kidding!" Obama said. "See, this is what gets me into trouble."

Pundits have portrayed Obama as an oversharer and a taskmaster, demeaning her husband by acknowledging his morning breath and his body odor. But the domestic carping that commentators have taken as some sort of uncontrollable T.M.I. tic serves Obama's husband well, and this may account for her frequent recitation of the mundane details of their housekeeping arrangements. By noting, for example, that Barack is "the 'Harry Potter' parent," and that she encourages him to find time to read to Malia and Sasha, Michelle makes Barack seem like a great dad and a guardian of young womanhood. The contrast between their family life and that of the Clintons is implicit. When Michelle remarks—as she did, now famously, at a fund-raiser hosted in Beverly Hills—that Barack forgets to "secure the bread so that it doesn't get stale," she's playing the martinet as hammily as she played the big hungry bear in South Carolina.

"Occasionally, it gives campaign people heartburn," David Axelrod, the Obama campaign's chief strategist, admits. "She's fundamentally honest—goes out there, speaks her mind, jokes. She doesn't parse her words or select them with an antenna for political correctness."

People forget that Barack himself has been working the hapless-hubby routine for a long time: he writes about trying to enjoy the bachelor life as a freshman senator in Washington but finding himself too "fully domesticated, soft, and helpless" to remember to buy a shower curtain. The ordinary card, in fact, may be one of the Obamas' best assets. It assuages fears of difference—"We're just like you" is the cumulative message of all the back-and-forth about the breath and the bread—and inoculates against jealousy, a smart bit of self-deprecation on the part of a young, gifted, attractive couple whose fortunes have risen quickly, like movie stars insisting that they were unpopular in high school.

Besides, Obama's tendency toward deflation isn't limited to Barack. Cindy Moelis recalls commissioning a cookie bouquet with icing in the pattern of the Obama campaign's logo and presenting it to Michelle, who replied, "Oh, great. More sugar for the kids." Obama's dismissiveness is not that of the spoiled princess, as her detractors have suggested, but that of the wary striver: why get used to things being good if they could fall apart at any moment?

"Michelle's always been very vocal about anything," her mother, Marian Robinson, told me. "If it's not right, she's going to say so. When she was at Princeton, her brother"—Craig, now the head basketball coach at Brown, was two years ahead of Michelle—"called me and said, 'Mom, Michelle's here telling people they're not teaching French right.' She thought the style was not conversational enough. I told him, 'Just pretend you don't know her.'"

There is more to the Obamas' relationship, however, than the caricature of Michelle as a ballbreaker to Barack's Obambi (Maureen Dowd's term). Consider the moments leading up to Barack's career-making speech at the Democratic National Convention in 2004. The story that the Obamas like to tell, and that their chroniclers like to repeat, is that Michelle pulled Barack aside just before he took the stage, warning him, "Just don't screw it up, buddy!"

Someone who was involved in the preparation of the speech recalls a more nuanced dynamic, as Michelle calmed an irritable Barack. "We were spending intense sessions tinkering with wording and commas," the person says. "It was pretty tense, because everybody was picking at Barack and making suggestions. He was getting a little irate. Michelle was in the room, and she was kind of handling both him as well as some of the speech." The observer went on, "She was listening intently and, without being overly directive, was somebody that he could glance over to, almost a telepathic kind of relationship. He was clearly looking to her for reaction."

Earlier on the day that Obama visited the nursery school, she addressed a congregation at the Pee Dee Union Baptist Church, in Cheraw, a hamlet of about six thousand known as "The Prettiest Town in Dixie." The church's makeshift gravel parking lot, next to the Pee Dee Ice and Fuel Company and bounded by train tracks, was full. After an invocation by the Reverend Jerry Corbett and an introduction by the mayor of Cheraw, Obama came to the pulpit. "You all got up bright and early just for me?" she asked the mostly elderly, almost all-black crowd. "Yes!" they roared. Obama continued, "On behalf of my church home and my pastor, Reverend Wright, I bring greetings."

Obama opened with some reminiscing. "My people are from South Carolina," she said. "I don't know if y'all knew that.... In fact, my brother and I came down last week for a mini family reunion at my grandparents' church, because they retired back down here, and before their death they were living here, attending an A.M.E. Baptist church in Georgetown."

Obama was playing to her audience—later she riffed on "those relatives who have plastic on the furniture" and reminded the churchgoers to get "ten other triflin' people in your life" out of bed and down to the polls on Saturday. Her appearances at the church, and many like it, were a key point of strategy in a state that would be the first real test of whether or not Barack could attract significant numbers of black voters. "In South Carolina in particular, because she had family from there, it made a lot of sense for her to speak in the African-American community," David Axelrod said.

After warming up the crowd, Obama launched into her stump speech, a forty-five-minute monologue that she composed herself and delivers without notes. Obama has been open about the value of her ability to speak to black audiences in cadences that reflect their experience, but she makes clear her distaste for the notion that she is a niche tool, wielded by her husband's campaign to woo black voters solely on the basis of their shared racial identity. "I mean, I've been to every early state," she told me, when I asked her about reports that she was "deployed" in the South to reach black audiences. "I was 'deployed' to Iowa," she said, making air quotes with her fingers. "I was 'deployed' to New Hampshire." The four times I heard her give the speech—in a ballroom at the University of South Carolina, from the pulpit of Pee Dee Union, at an art gallery in Charleston, and in the auditorium of St. Norbert College, in De Pere, Wisconsin—its content was admirably consistent, with few of the politician's customary tweaks and nods to the demographic predilections, or prejudices, of a particular audience.

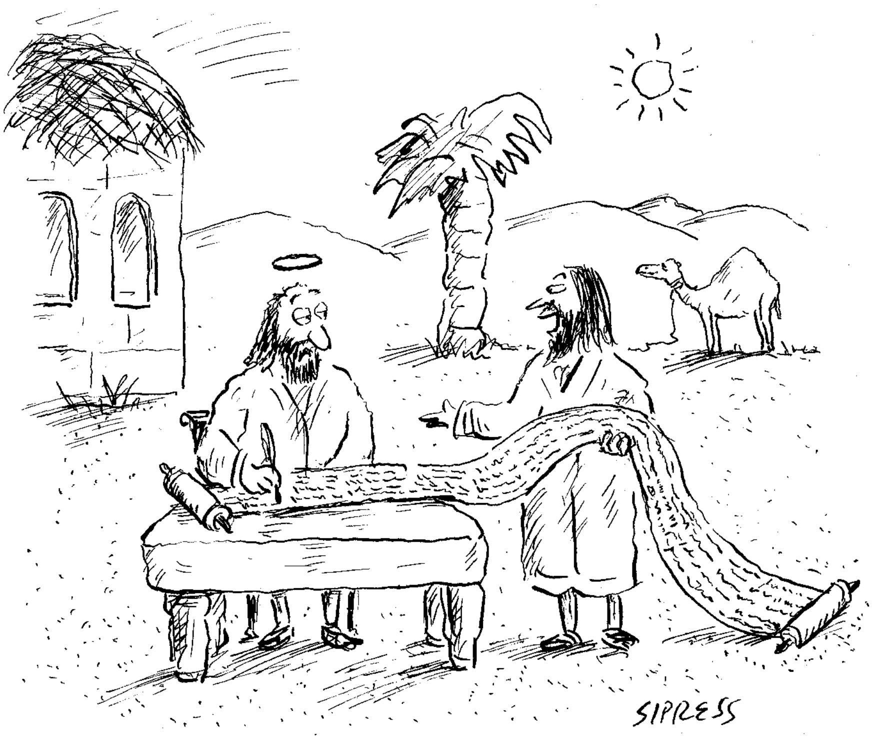
Obama begins with a broad assessment of life in America in 2008, and life is not good: we're a divided country, we're a country that is "just downright mean," we are "guided by fear," we're a nation of cynics, sloths, and complacents. "We have become a nation of struggling folks who are barely making it every day," she said, as heads bobbed in the pews. "Folks are just jammed up, and it's gotten worse over my lifetime. And, doggone it, I'm young. Forty-four!"

From these bleak generalities, Obama moves into specific complaints. Used to be, she will say, that you could count on a decent education in the neighborhood. But now there are all these charter schools and magnet schools that you have to "finagle" to get into. (Obama herself attended a magnet school, but never mind.) Health care is out of reach ("Let me tell you, don't get sick in America"), pensions are disappearing, college is too expensive, and even if you can figure out a way to go to college you won't be able to recoup the cost of the degree in many of the professions for which you needed it in the first place. "You're looking at a young couple that's just a few years out of debt," Obama said. "See, because, we went to those good schools, and we didn't have trust funds. I'm still waiting for Barack's trust fund. Especially after I heard that Dick Cheney was s'posed to be a relative or something. Give us something here!"

First Ladies have traditionally gravitated toward happy topics like roadside flower beds, so it comes as a surprise that Obama's speech is such an unrelenting downer. Obama acknowledged to me that some advisers have lobbied her to take a sunnier tone, with little success. "For me," she said, "you can talk about policies and plans and experience and all that. We usually get bogged down in that in a Presidential campaign, over the stuff that I think doesn't matter. . . . I mean, I guess I could go into Barack's policies and rattle them off. But that's what he's for." In Cheraw, Obama belittled the idea that the Clinton years were ones of opportunity and prosperity: "The life that I'm talking about that most people are living has gotten progressively worse since I was a little girl. . . . So if you want to pretend like there was some point over the last couple of decades when your lives were easy, I want to meet you!"

After the speech, Obama was whisked into the church basement. A clutch of people gathered nearby, hoping to catch a glimpse of her. But when she emerged into the chilly morning air, she didn't linger long with her well-wishers. She can seem squeamish about politicking, put off by the awkward stagecraft of glad-handing and the small-group discussions—Michelle, five or six women, and, as she put it one day in Wisconsin, "five thousand cameras"—that her staff bills as "intimate conversations." But she thrives in large venues. Cindy Moelis said, "The first time she got feedback on being such a wonderful speaker, I think when people said, 'Wow, you're really good at that,' she goes, 'Why's everybody surprised?' "

If Michelle Obama's husband succeeds in garnering the Democratic nomination and then in winning the general election in November, she will be not only the first black First Lady of the United States but also one of the youngest since Jackie Kennedy. Yet, for a potential revolutionary, Michelle Obama is deeply conventional. She exudes a nostalgia, invoking the innocence and order of the past, as much as her husband beckons to a liberating future. Listening to her speeches, with their longing for a lost, spit-shine world, one could sometimes mistake her, were it not for the emphasis on social justice, for a law-and-order Republican. "It's not just about politics; it's TV," she says, of our collective decay. And, wistfully: "The life I had growing up seems so much more simple." She is a successful working mother, but an ambivalent one: "My mother stayed at home. She didn't have to work." Her music of choice is Stevie Wonder, and has been since her child-



"Quit worrying about corroborating your sources—it's not as if anyone's going to take all this literally."

"I'm not withholding. I'm busy."

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hood. (At the Obamas' wedding, a friend sang "You and I.") One of her favorite foods is macaroni and cheese. In "The Audacity of Hope," acknowledging the appeal of the Reagan Administration, Barack writes, "It was related to the pleasure that I still get from watching a well-played baseball game, or my wife gets from watching reruns of 'The Dick Van Dyke Show.'"

Obama draws a straight line from the way her parents, Fraser and Marian Robinson, raised her to the world as it ought to be. For all her modern womanhood, she has not been tempted by rebellion or self-differentiation. "My lens of life, how I see the world, is through my background, my upbringing," she said, in South Carolina.

Fraser Robinson and Marian Shields, who both grew up on the South Side of Chicago, married in 1960. Craig was born two years later, and on January 17, 1964, Marian gave birth to Michelle LaVaughn, whom Fraser nicknamed Miche. She and Craig looked so much alike (and still do) that people often mistook them for twins. Fraser, who was partially handicapped by multiple sclerosis, worked swing shifts as a city pump operator, while Marian tended to the children. The family lived in a modest house that they rented from a relative in the South Shore neighborhood. "If I had to describe it to a real estate agent, it would be 1BR, 1BA," Craig told Peter Slevin, of the Washington *Post*. "If you said it was eleven hundred square feet, I'd call you a liar."

Money was scarce but sufficient. Fraser took pride in providing for his family. "If the TV broke and we didn't have any money to have it fixed, we could go out and buy another one on a charge card, as long as we paid the bills on time," Marian told me. Saturday nights were spent at home playing Chinese checkers, Monopoly, or a game called Hands Down (like spoons, with bluffing). It was a simple time. "I probably had two sleepovers my entire life," Craig said. "We were home folks." Many years, the family drove to Dukes Happy Holiday Resort, in Michigan, for a week's vacation.

The Robinsons went to church occasionally, but if they subscribed to any credo it was that of freethinking. From a young age, Craig and Michelle were encouraged to make choices, and to contend with the consequences. "More important, even, than learning to read and write was to teach them to think," Marian Robinson said. "We told them, 'Make sure you respect your teachers, but don't hesitate to question them. Don't even allow us to just say anything to you. Ask us why.'" Craig recalls, of Michelle, "I wouldn't say she ran roughshod over her friends, but she was sort of the natural leader."

Craig became a basketball star at a parochial school, while Michelle rode the bus, and then the El, to attend classes at Whitney M. Young Magnet High School. Michelle's Class of '81 yearbook—she was treasurer of her class—includes a picture of her as a serious-looking young lady in a bright-yellow silk shirt. She did not play varsity sports, even though people were always telling her she should. Craig told me, "That's the best way to get her not to do something. She didn't want to play just because she was tall and black and athletic." Bernadette McHale, one of her teachers, recalled, "Our first full graduating class was in '78, so it was pretty experimental to come here. She made a decision to choose an integrated environment that had more diversity in both curriculum and population."

Craig was recruited to play basketball at Princeton, and Michelle—who figured she could cut it if he could—followed him there. Princeton in 1981 was not particularly hospitable to minorities of any sort. "It was a very sexist, segregated place," Angela Acree, who was Obama's roommate there for three years, recalled. She continued, "We couldn't afford any furniture, so we just had pillows on the floor, and a stereo." Their social lives revolved around gatherings at the Third World Center, rather than the university's eating clubs. Acree recalled, "The white people didn't dance—I know that sounds like a cliché—and they also played a completely different kind of music, whereas we were playing R. & B., Luther Vandross, Run-D.M.C., at the T.W.C."

Obama majored in sociology, investigating, in her senior thesis, "Princeton-Educated Blacks and the Black Community," the ways in which attending Princeton affected black alumni's sense of connection to the black community. At Obama's request, the thesis was embargoed until November 5, 2008. Last month, amid charges of hypocrisy—the Obama campaign has congratulated itself on transparency—Obama finally released the document to the Web site *Politico*. A sample passage: "Unfortunately there are very few adequate support groups which provide some form of guidance and counsel for Black students having difficulty making the transition from their home environments to Princeton's environment. Most students are dependent upon the use of their own faculties to carry them through Princeton." She dedicated the project to "Mom, Dad, Craig and all of my special friends. Thank-you for loving me and always making me feel good about myself."

Obama went straight from Princeton to Harvard Law School. After graduating, she became a junior associate, specializing in intellectual property law, at the Chicago firm of Sidley & Austin. She worked there for three years, eventually becoming, as she says in her stump speech, disenchanted with "corporate America." Valerie Jarrett hired her as an assistant to the mayor, Richard Daley. "In the planning department, part of her job was to help businesses solve problems," Jarrett told me. Sort of like a one-woman 311? "No, a 911," Jarrett responded. "She made problems go away just that fast." In 1993, she was appointed the founding director of the Chicago office of a public-service program called Public Allies, which places young adults from diverse backgrounds in paid internships with nonprofit organizations. An early appearance in the Chicago *Tribune* was in an article about Gen X-ers. Obama told the reporter, "I wear jeans, and I'm the director."

Michelle and Barack met at Sidley & Austin, when she was assigned to advise him during a summer job. Michelle's co-workers warned her that the summer associate was cute. "I figured that they were just impressed with any black man with a suit and a job," she later told Barack. Over her protestations—she felt that dating someone she worked with would be "tacky," her brother recalls—Barack began to court his boss. "She took me to one or two parties," Barack writes, "tactfully overlooking my limited wardrobe, and she even tried to set me up with a couple of her friends." Before the end of the summer, he'd got her to agree to go out for a movie—Spike Lee's "Do the Right Thing"—and an ice-cream cone at Baskin-Robbins. Vacationing on Martha's Vineyard in 2004, Barack met Spike Lee at a reception. As Michelle has recalled, he told Lee, "I owe you a lot," because, during the movie, Michelle had allowed him to touch her knee.

Barack had a more bohemian attitude toward romance. "We would have this running debate throughout our relationship about whether marriage was necessary," Obama told me. "It was sort of a bone of contention, because I was, like, 'Look, buddy, I'm not one of these who'll just hang out forever.' You know, that's just not who I am. He was, like"—she broke into a wishy-washy voice—"'Marriage, it doesn't mean anything, it's really how you feel.' And I was, like, 'Yeah, right.' " Eventually, he proposed to her over dinner at Gordon, a restaurant in Chicago. "He took me out to a nice dinner under the guise of celebrating the fact that he had finished the bar," Obama recalled. "And he got me into one of these discussions again, where, you know, he sort of just led me down there and got fired up and it's like you've got blah blah blah blah, and then dessert comes out, the tray comes out, and there's a ring!"

The couple married in 1992, and moved into a condominium in a walkup building in Hyde Park. Cindy Moelis recalled a dinner party the Obamas gave when they were newlyweds: shrimp-and-pasta, inexpensive art on the walls from their travels to Hawaii and Kenya. Barack was not the life of the party. "Because Barack was so smart, he was pretty serious when we were in our thirties. I'd poke him and say, 'Come on, let's talk about the last movie you saw,'" Moelis said. "At some point in our forties, I said to Michelle, 'You know, I think he's so much grown into who he is now. He's so much more lighthearted.' Because he became a senator and he had this wonderful outlet to be a policy person and to be intense, and when he got home he could relax and laugh and just have dinner with friends and talk about movies and basketball."

Parenthood, far more than politics, has been the catalytic force in Michelle's adult life. She is passionate about being a mother, and about confronting the problems that working women face in making time for both their families and their professions. When I asked if there was an issue she has worked particularly hard to bring to her husband's attention, she replied, "The attention that he's focussed on work-family balance.... That is our life. To the extent that we have challenges, and struggles, headaches that everybody else is going through...those are our conversations." (Barack has candidly chronicled their struggle "to balance work and family in a way that's equitable to Michelle and good for our children," and its toll on their marriage.) Her frame of reference can seem narrow. When she talks about wanting "my girls to travel the world with pride" and the decline of America "over my lifetime," you wonder why her default pronoun is singular if the message is meant to be concern for others and inclusiveness.

Last summer, Obama's mother retired from her job as a bank secretary in order to look after Malia and Sasha when Barack and Michelle are on the road. (The Obamas employ a full-time housekeeper, and Michelle tries to see a personal trainer four times a week, but they do not have a nanny.) Obama speaks frequently of her reliance on a network of female relatives, friends, and co-workers. Her staff comprises a collection of mostly young women, practical yet fashionable, like their leader, efficient but not effusive. On Super Tuesday, before the triumphant couple took the stage in the ballroom of the Chicago Hyatt, one of Obama's aides leaned over and whispered in my ear, "Tonight, she's wearing red."

When Barack was elected to the United States Senate, the Obamas decided that Michelle and the girls would remain in Chicago rather than leave behind what she refers to as her "support base." A local mother told the *Tribune*, of their chore-swapping, "This weekend was Hannah Montana, next weekend Michelle has soccer-skills practice."

One morning, during a roundtable at

Ma Fischer's, a diner in Milwaukee, Elizabeth Crawford, a recently divorced caterer with two children, brought up the subject of the eating habits of American families. "I really, really hope that Barack will jump on that," she said.

Then, having given thoughtful but boilerplate responses most of the morning, Obama suddenly departed from her script. It was the most animated I saw her on the campaign trail. "You know," she said, "in my household, over the last year we have just shifted to organic for this very reason. I mean, I saw just a moment in my nine-year-old's life—we have a good pediatrician, who is very focussed on childhood obesity, and there was a period where he was, like, 'Mmm, she's tipping the scale.' So we started looking through our cabinets.... You know, you've got fast food on Saturday, a couple days a week you don't get home. The leftovers, good, not the third day! . . . So that whole notion of cooking on Sunday is out. . . . And the notion of trying to think about a lunch every day! . . . So you grab the Lunchables, right? And the fruit-juice-box thing, and we think—we *think*—that's juice. And you start reading the labels and you realize there's high-fructose corn syrup in everything we're eating. Every jelly, every juice. Everything that's in a bottle or a package is like poison in a way that most people don't even know.... Now we're keeping, like, a bowl of fresh fruit in the house. But you have to go to the fruit stand a couple of times a week to keep that fruit fresh enough that a six-year-old—she's not gonna eat the pruney grape, you know. At that point it's, like, '*Eww!*' She's not gonna eat the brown banana or the shrivelledy-up things. It's got to be fresh for them to want it. Who's got time to go to the fruit stand? Who can afford it, first of all?"

NEEDLE'S EYE

I wish I were as big as a basketball hoop.
It is actually painful to be this fine.
It is like squinting for no reason,
all night, choosing the pain of squinting
over going to sleep. And yet
what does it matter how big
a target you are? Someone somewhere
will invent a game to make you hard to hit.

—*Dan Chiasson*

The Obamas are fixtures of Chicago's philanthro-social scene: there they are, waving from a silver Mustang at the annual Bud Billiken Parade and Picnic; there's Michelle delivering remarks at the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority's Seventy-second Central Regional Conference; there she is arriving at the Black Creativity Gala with a shopping bag full of "Obama for Senator" buttons. Cindy Moelis recalls being shocked, after agreeing to host Obama's baby shower, that the guest list included fifty people. "Hmmm," Michael Sneed, the *Sun-Times* columnist, reported in 2006. "Sneed hears rumbles a mink coat reportedly belonging to Michelle Obama, wife of Sen. Barack Obama, may have gone missing following the Rev. Jesse Jackson's birthday bash at the South Shore Cultural Center."

The Obamas' financial standing has risen sharply in the past three years, largely as a result of the money Barack earned from writing "The Audacity of Hope." In 2005, their income was $1.67 million, which was more than they had earned in the previous seven years combined. "Our lives are so close to normal, if there is such a thing when you're running for President," Michelle has said. "When I'm off the road, I'm going to Target to get the toilet paper, I'm standing on soccer fields, and I think there's just a level of connection that gets lost the further you get into being a candidate."

Just after Barack was elected to the United States Senate, Michelle received a large pay increase—from $121,910 in 2004 to $316,962 in 2005. "Mrs. Obama is extremely overpaid," one citizen wrote in a letter to the editor of the *Tribune*, after the paper published a story questioning the timing of the award. "Now, what is the real reason behind such an inflated salary?" Her bosses at the University of Chicago Hospitals vigorously defended the raise, pointing out that it put her salary on a par with that of other vice-presidents at the hospital. (As it happens, Obama has spent most of her life working within the two institutions for which she most frequently claims a populist disdain: government and the health-care system.)

Michelle's roots in the community predate her involvement with Barack; in fact, he has written that it was one of the things that attracted him to her, awakening, after years of peripatetic soul-searching, "a longing for stability and a sense of place that I had not realized was there." Barbara Pace-Moody, the development director of Muntu, an African-dance company on whose board Obama serves, recalls meeting her, in the early nineties, when they were both volunteers for a mentoring program: "We spent every Saturday with young women from the Chicago Housing Authority. We had a big gala, and she and her sister-in-law took their own money and paid for the girls to get their hair done and set them up in a hotel downtown. I remember thinking, Who *is* this Michelle Robinson?"

More troubling to the Obamas' image of civic rectitude is their entanglement with a campaign contributor named Antoin (Tony) Rezko in a 2005 real-estate deal. (Rezko is now awaiting trial on corruption charges.) That year, as the *Tribune* reported, the Obamas moved to a $1.65-million Georgian Revival mansion in Hyde Park, which features a thousand-bottle wine cellar and bookcases made of Honduran mahogany. On the day they bought the house, Rita Rezko, Tony's wife, purchased the adjacent lot, which was wooded and empty, for $625,000. After the deal went through, Michelle contacted the city's landmarks commission, which she had served on, and received an e-mail from a deputy commissioner with suggestions for obtaining permits to erect a fence between the parcels. The Obamas paid for legal, architectural, and landscaping work, while Rezko got the bill for the fence's construction, for fourteen thousand dollars. (Obama paid the proper fraction of the purchase price for a sliver of land that he bought from the Rezkos as a buffer.)

The other Chicago connection that dogs the Obamas is Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr., their pastor at Trinity United Church of Christ. Wright, who drives a Porsche and references Bernie Mac and Terry McMillan in his unorthodox sermons ("Take what God gave you and say, 'In your face, mediocrity, I'm a bad mamma jamma!'"), officiated at Michelle and Barack's wedding and baptized their two daughters. Barack took the title "The Audacity of Hope" from a sermon that Wright preached. In 2006, the Obamas gave $22,500 to the church.

Wright espouses a theology that seeks to reconcile African-American Christianity with, as he has written, "the raw data of our racist existence in this strange land." The historical accuracy of that claim is incontestable. But his message is more confrontational than may be palatable to some white voters. In his book "Africans Who Shaped Our Faith"—an extended refutation of the Western Christianity that gave rise to "the European Jesus . . . the blesser of the slave trade, the defender of racism and apartheid"—he says, "In this country, racism is as natural as motherhood, apple pie, and the fourth of July. Many black people have been deluded into thinking that our BMWs, Lexuses, Porsches, Benzes, titles, heavily mortgaged condos and living environments can influence people who are fundamentally immoral."

In portraying America as "a Eurocentric wasteland of lily-white lies and outright distortions," Wright promulgates a theory of congenital separatism that is deeply at odds with Obama's professed belief in the possibilities of unity and change. Last year, *Trumpet Newsmagazine*, which was launched by Trinity United and is run by Wright's daughter, gave the Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. Trumpeter Award to Louis Farrakhan, leading to accusations that Wright was anti-Semitic.

Barack's advisers have tried to dismiss the criticisms of his association with Wright as a witch hunt by conservative blogs and talk-show hosts. The candidate disinvited Wright from giving the convocation when he announced his Presidential bid. Last month, I attended an Ash Wednesday service at the church. When it was over, I approached Wright and asked him to tell me about Michelle Obama. "She's from the 'hood," he said. Within seconds, a minder rushed over to say that I was forbidden to conduct any interviews on the premises.

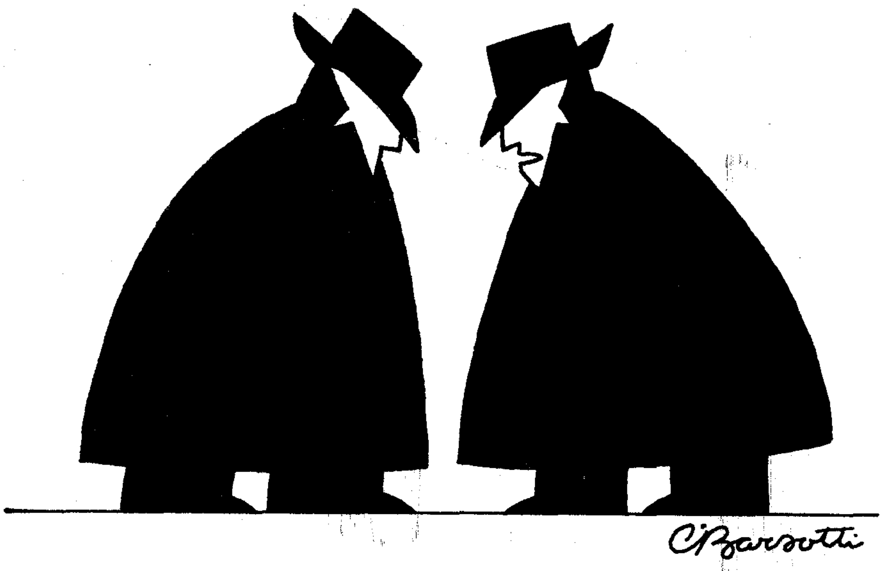
"We don't want our church to receive the brunt of this notoriety," Obama told me. I asked her whether Wright's statements presented a problem for her or for Barack. "You know, your pastor is like your grandfather, right?" she said. "There are plenty of things he says that I don't agree with, that Barack doesn't agree with." When it comes to absolute doctrinal adherence, she said, "I don't know that there would be a church in this country that I would be involved in. So, you know, you make choices, and you sort of—you can't disown yourself from your family because they've got things wrong. You try to be a part of expanding the conversation." (She made a similar argument when I asked if she agreed with her husband in opposing gay marriage. "It's like you gotta do the baby steps. . . . You don't start with the hardest, toughest issues when you're trying to unite a group.")

Obama does not avoid blunt discussions about race. One year, she and Cindy Moelis, who is white, went to a spa in Utah to celebrate their birthdays. "We were in the cafeteria, getting healthy food for breakfast," Moelis recalled. "Everybody was, like, 'Hey, Michelle!'" Moelis wondered aloud why nobody remembered *her* name. "See any more six-foot-tall African-American women?" Obama replied. "I didn't think so. So stop taking it personally."

Michelle's perceived authenticity has been an asset to Barack. Ron Carter, a former associate of the Black Panther Party who is the publisher of the *South Street Journal*, told me that he was impressed by her handling of a combustible situation that arose during Barack's senatorial campaign, following a speech that he gave at Liberty Baptist Church, on Chicago's South Side. "There were lots of radicals protesting, calling into question his loyalty to the community," Carter recalled. "She came out the back door, and there were a bunch of hoodlum thugs ready to do a full-blast demonstration. She put on her street sense and asked all the guys, 'Y'all got a problem or something?' They all froze, guys who would slap the mayor, who would slap Jesse Jackson in the face, even."

Barack has written eloquently about the pressure of assimilation for members of minority groups. When I asked Michelle if she had felt that sort of pressure, she replied, "What minority communities go through still represents the challenges, the legacies, of oppression and racism. You know, when you have cultures who feel like second-class citizens at some level . . . there's this natural feeling within

"I want to see other hallucinations."



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the community that we're not good enough. . .we can't be as smart as or as prepared—and it's that internal struggle that is always the battle.” She talked about her first trip to Africa—Barack took her to Kenya to meet his father's family—and the realization that, as much as white society fails to account for the African-American experience, so does any conception of pan-blackness. “There's also the view among many black Americans that Africa is home,” she said. “But when you're a black American you're very much an American first.”

Marian Robinson told me that she did not know that Barack's mother was white until long after she met him. “He never talked about himself,” she said. The Obamas' partnership has been a source of great pride among African-American women. In an essay on TheRoot.com, Kim McLarin writes that Obama reminds her of Ntozake Shange's play “For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf”: “ordinary/brown braided woman/with big legs and full lips/reglar.” For her, the Obamas' relationship is a public validation of the worthiness of dark-skinned women. “He chose one of us, and I am thrilled,” McLarin writes. “She loves, respects, and adores Barack, but *she* is the prize and she damn well knows it. He better know it, too.”

In Chicago, Barbara Pace-Moody opened her e-mail to show me a JPEG of Barack and Michelle that she had been forwarded as an exemplar of a strong marriage. In it, Michelle stands behind Barack, her arms clasped around his waist, while he leans back, his hands over hers, closing his eyes ever so slightly. The picture was taken at a rally in New Hampshire, but they could have been on a beach in Hawaii. *Ebony* named “Barack & Michelle” to its “10 Hottest Couples” list this year, in the company of Beyoncé and Jay-Z. An aide, referring to their “kissy” backstage displays, told me, “They're, like, ‘We don't care who's standing by.’”

Some observers have detected in Obama an air of entitlement. Her defenders attribute these charges of arrogance to racist fears about uppity black women. While it's a stretch to call the suggestion that Obama projects an air of self-satisfaction bigoted, it may at least reflect a culture gap: last April, after Maureen Dowd wrote a column criticizing Obama for undermining her husband's mystique, a blog riposte, circulated widely on the Internet, was titled “The White Lady Just Doesn't Get It.”

Things had been going remarkably smoothly for Michelle Obama until mid-February. Campaigning four days a week, she was drawing crowds in the thousands. According to David Axelrod, she had urged the campaign to be aggressive in its outreach to female voters, and her husband had made significant inroads with a demographic that had been a Clinton stronghold. “She's pivoted her language to ‘See how far we've come’ as opposed to ‘Don't we have a long way to go,’” one of Obama's advisers told me, in Sheboygan. “It's weird,” Craig Robinson said, at the beginning of the month. “It's like if your sister's a budding actress, and all of a sudden she's Julia Roberts.”

Speaking at a rally in Wisconsin on February 18th, Obama remarked, “For the first time in my adult lifetime, I am really proud of my country, and not just because Barack has done well, but because I think people are hungry for change.” The sentiment—that America was in a mess, and Mrs. Obama was not happy about it—was not a new one, but her unfortunate formulation instantly drew charges that she was unpatriotic. Bill O'Reilly spawned his own scandalette, remarking, “I don't want to go on a lynching party against Michelle Obama unless there's evidence, hard facts, that say this is how the woman really feels.” Victor Maltsev, of Rego Park, wrote to the *Post*, “Obama wants to be our next first lady? Watch out, America!” Cindy McCain seized the opportunity to draw a sniffy contrast between the Obamas and her and her war-hero husband, telling a cheering crowd, “I don't know about you—if you heard those words earlier—I'm very proud of my country.”

It was a manufactured controversy, but it reflected a real cavalierness on Obama's part—not toward the Blue Angels and 9/11 and the Berlin Wall and America's armed forces, as her various critics had it, but toward the reality that it might be wise for a person whose spouse is running for President not to say something that could be construed that way. The controversy over her brand of household humor may have been a matter of cultural misinterpretation. But Obama's blitheness about politics may have less to do with race than it does with class—conservative commentators pegged her as a paragon of élitist leftism—or, more likely, for a daughter of blue-collar Chicago, with personal disposition. In our conversation, she came across as almost apolitical. I asked her about the first time she voted. “Oh, God, um, I've voted every time that I could vote, but I don't—it doesn't stand out," she said. "You know, that was just something you did. You know, you didn't not vote. . . . But I, you know, it wasn't like this moving experience for me"—she breathed in dramatically—" 'I cast my first vote!' " ("I feel kind of bad about it," she once told a reporter, unconvincingly, who asked whether she participated in the Senate spouses' club.)

The self-assurance that colors Obama's assumption that her personal feelings are some bellwether of American achievement is also palpable in her forceful declarations that her husband is the only person who can solve the country's problems. "I tell people I am married to the answer," she said, in a speech in Harlem. "The man . . . who I am willing to sacrifice," she called her husband, in Iowa. In November, on MSNBC: "Black voters will wake up and get it." There is a hectoring, buy-one-while-supplies-last quality to Obama's frequent admonitions that Americans will have only one chance to elect her husband President. Someone who has spent a good portion of her life gaining purchase has suddenly been asked to sell something, and she seems to find it slightly beneath her.

Perhaps Obama's high-handedness is preëmptive, her way of "claiming a seat at the table"—as she is fond of calling enfranchisement in the power-brokering structure—rather than waiting to be offered one. It's as though she figures she might as well say that she and her husband are all that before someone can say that they aren't. And there's a sort of strategic genius to her presentation of campaigning as grinding work that takes her away from her family, rather than a glorious tour of the world's greatest country that she would be thrilled to be undertaking even if she didn't have to. She frequently tells her audiences, "I don't care where I am, the first question is 'How are you managing it all? How are you holding up?' " The effect, of course, is to set up an expectation of tribute, like those hairdressers who display all their gifts in the days leading up to Christmas. By loudly voicing her distaste for retail politicking, Obama makes people feel as though, by showing up, she were doing *them* a favor.

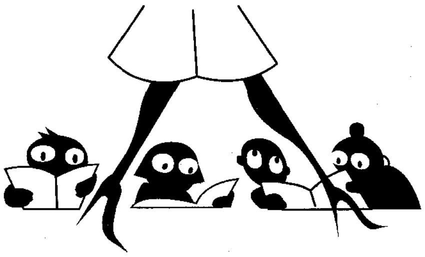
One on one, Obama is gracious. A week before the Wisconsin primary, she made an appearance at the Hops Haven Brew Haus, in Sheboygan. When it was over, I joined her in the back seat of a Ford Explorer for part of the ride to Green Bay. Space was tight, and I couldn't find anywhere to put my sludgy boots except practically on top of her black leather pocketbook. (If a woman's handbag is a window onto her soul, Obama really is normal: hers had an empty M&M's wrapper and an iPod sticking out of an unzipped compartment.) "You know what, let me move it because I can put it out of your way," she said. Someone was trying to put something in the trunk, which was locked. "Oh, they're trying to get in the back," she said, and moved to help, like a mother packing her charges into the station wagon.

The acrimony between the Obamas and the Clintons had been intensifying in the days leading up to the Wisconsin primary. I asked Obama if she was worried about negative attacks on her husband. She was diplomatic. "We've pretty much heard it all," she said.

"She's very competitive, and she believes deeply in him and in what we're doing," David Axelrod said later. "I don't think she's a pacifist—if she thinks we're being treated unfairly or doesn't think we're being aggressive enough in debunking attacks, she will say so. She does not fold up into the lotus position and start chanting 'kumbaya.' She's against gratuitous attacks but she's not against defending our position and making sure we don't get punked."

Others in the Obama camp were less circumspect. "I'm telling you, she's not faking the funk, that's for sure. Neither is he," Craig Robinson said, over lunch in Providence. "And that's why it's working. That's why people are connecting. 'Cause you can't B.S. that good. Even if you're Bill Clinton you can't, because he's getting called on it."

I asked Robinson about Bill Clinton's "fairy tale" comment. "He's straight up saying things that aren't true," Robinson responded. "And it was great, because Barack didn't go crazy. He just said, 'Hey, we just have to say something when somebody says something that's blatantly not true.' No one's ever called those people on it." He went on, "Michelle and Barack's plan is to win this election. They can't be worried about what he says. I mean, you know, sometimes you get angry. But it's so ludicrous that it's almost comical. It really is. It really is. And the whole crying now before every primary? You've got to be kidding me. If I was a woman, I'd be embarrassed for her," he said of Hillary Clinton.



The competition between the two couples, and specifically between Michelle Obama and Bill Clinton, became explicit later when one of Michelle's advisers pulled me aside and pointed out that Michelle had recently been given Secret Service protection. "So that's both spouses on both sides," the aide pointed out.

Back in the Explorer, I asked Obama if she thought that her husband, as the Democratic nominee, could take John McCain. "Oh, yeah. We got him," she replied.

When the conversation turned to the broader significance of Obama's candidacy, I wondered if the burden of history weighed upon her. "No, I just don't think in those terms," Obama said. "I'm very much one foot in front of the other. You know, we're not there. We've got to win a bunch of states and delegates and, you know, this is a messy process. And then there's still a general election. So I am so far away from history right now that it's like, 'Why get caught up in that emotionally when there's so much stuff in front of us that we have to do?' Plus, I've got kids, and, you know, what are we doing for spring break, and their birthdays are coming up. I've got plenty of stuff to worry about before my legacy in history and all that."

In "The Audacity of Hope," Barack Obama perceives a vulnerability in his wife, one so closely guarded that even her brother professed to me never to have noticed it. There was "a glimmer that danced across her round, dark eyes whenever I looked at her," he writes, "the slightest hint of uncertainty, as if, deep inside, she knew how fragile things really were, and that if she ever let go, even for a moment, all her plans might quickly unravel." The Explorer rolled on to Green Bay. ♦

LETTER FROM PARIS

ELEGANT MONSTERS

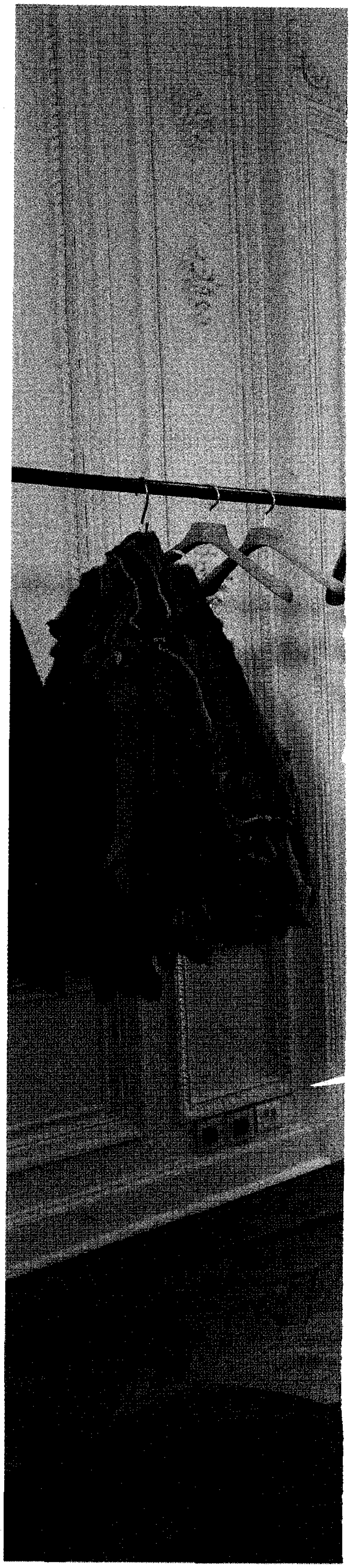
Behind Rick Owens's rock-and-roll look.

BY JOHN COLAPINTO

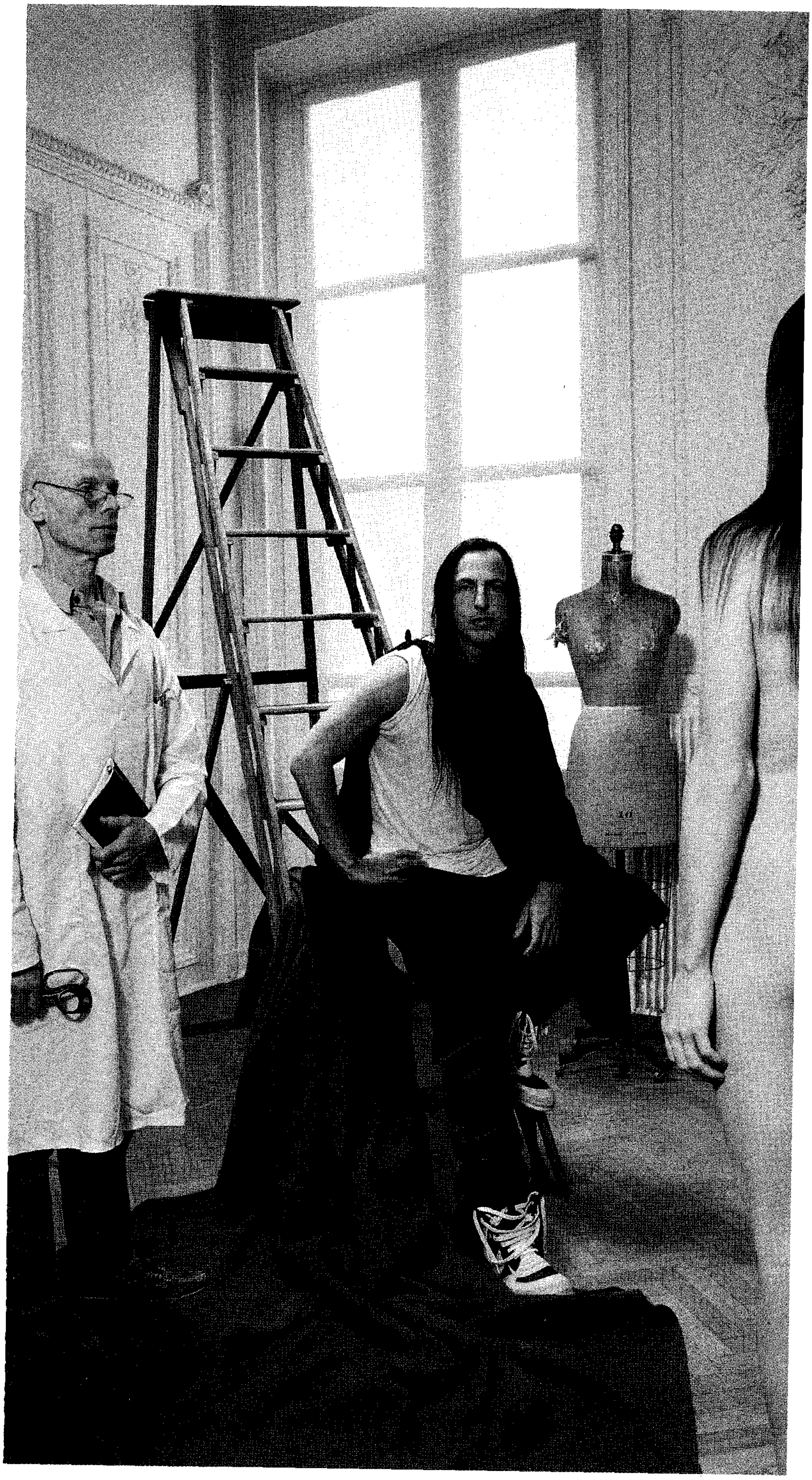
One Friday morning last September, Valentine, a tall blond Dutch model, arrived at the studio of Rick Owens, the American fashion designer, who lives and works in a five-story mansion on the Place du Palais Bourbon, in central Paris. It was two days before the beginning of Fashion Week, and Valentine, who had been selected by Owens as a fitting model, would spend the morning trying on garments from his Spring 2008 collection, which was to be presented at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts on Sunday. Owens has been showing his label on the runway for just six years, but since the late nineties stylish women—including Helena Bonham Carter, Ellen Barkin, Angelina Jolie, and (lately) the Olsen twins—have been wearing his long, clingy T-shirts, elegantly asymmetrical dresses, and skinny-armed leather jackets, which are in constant demand at Barneys. Owens, a forty-six-year-old California native, whose deceptively casual designs combine luxury fabrics—ostrich, gazar, organza, and pleated eelskin—with meticulous, highly unconventional construction, has become the foremost purveyor of what he has called "glunge" (grunge plus glamour). He has acquired a following that could be described as cultlike or exclusive, were it not for the fact that he sells tens of millions of dollars' worth of clothes each year, in more than two hundred and fifty high-end fashion stores around the world. This summer, he will open a boutique in downtown Manhattan, his first in the United States.

Valentine glanced around nervously as she entered Owens's building, a staid, neoclassical pile that he and his wife, Michèle Lamy, who is French, bought in 2004. François Mitterrand once had an office on the first floor. The interior, however, suggests a gut demolition in progress, though it has already been given as much of a makeover as Owens intends, since he likes to work in surroundings that reflect his aesthetic of—as he has put it—"broken idealism." Except for some wedding-cake moldings in a few rooms, including Mitterrand's former office, he has stripped the place of its original details. The walls, shorn of wallpaper, are crumbling; the floors are dusty concrete slabs; and the ceilings are a tangle of ducts, wires, and pipes. On the top floor are Owens and Lamy's living quarters: a cavernous room furnished with an armchair, a TV screen mounted on a black plywood cube, and a bed, designed by Owens, with a U-shaped, six-foot-high headboard upholstered in brown wool felt—a sample from his furniture collection, which he would be presenting to the public at a Paris art gallery the following week. At the entrance to the room was a shower: a concrete platform with a drain in the center and no walls.

Valentine met Owens in his third-floor studio, a long, low room with windows covered by Swiss Army blankets, broken ceiling beams, and five racks of clothes, which had arrived that morning from the factory in Italy where Owens's label is produced. On a table at one end of the room, a laptop was playing the Ramones song "Now I Wanna Sniff Some Glue." Owens, who was eying the racks when Valentine arrived, was dressed in clothes that he had designed: a sleeveless black T-shirt made of fraying silk (exposing gym-pumped arms, adorned in tattoos), baggy black shorts, and, beneath the shorts, gray sweatpants with inside-out seams, the ragged ends tucked into unlaced, hand-sewn, leather high-tops, which sell for twelve hundred dollars. Long straight hair, dyed black, framed his face, which is domi-



Owens, with his fur consultant and a fitting model, is the foremost purveyor of what he has called "glunge" (grunge plus glamour). Photograph by Miles Aldridge.



nated by large dark eyes; he looks uncannily like Iggy Pop. Once, when he was asked by an interviewer to name his "teenage desire," Owens, who is bisexual, replied, "To fuck Iggy Pop." Having failed in that goal—"I met Iggy only once," he told me, "in a tacky Mexican drag bar in L.A.: a little, shrivelled, ugly guy on the dance floor with an Asian woman. But that's the way to meet him"—Owens did his best, he explained, "to turn into Iggy Pop." This ambition extended beyond straightening and dying his hair, which is naturally curly and prematurely white. Like Iggy, for many years Owens indulged in drugs and alcohol (mostly speed, cocaine, and vodka), in amounts that, before he stopped cold turkey, in the early nineties, nearly killed him.

He immediately put Valentine at ease. "Is this your first time doing the Paris shows?" he asked. She said that it was.

"Are people nice to you?" he asked.

"Well, the designers tend to be awfully busy and they see a lot of girls," she replied.

"Yeah," Owens said. "They can be so dismissive."

A few moments later, Valentine emerged from the fitting room wearing a gauzy tunic with a folded neckline designed to stand away from the nape, but she had put the garment on backward. "You know, it actually looks sorta good that way," Owens said softly. She reappeared in a long black skirt, and Owens knelt in front of her to adjust the unfinished hem.

"Gee," he said, looking up. "Are you extra tall?"

"No," she said. "One hundred and eighty-one centimetres"—that is, about five feet eleven inches, standard for a model.

"So you're not a freak," Owens said.

"No! Thank you," she said.

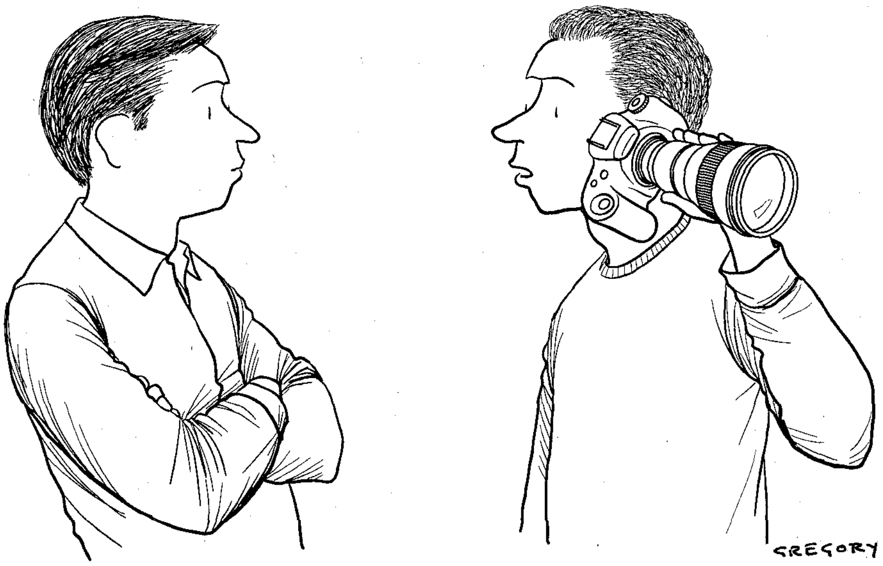
"Oh, yes, you are," he countered.

She flushed and frowned, failing to comprehend that, for Owens, "freak" is a compliment of the highest order.

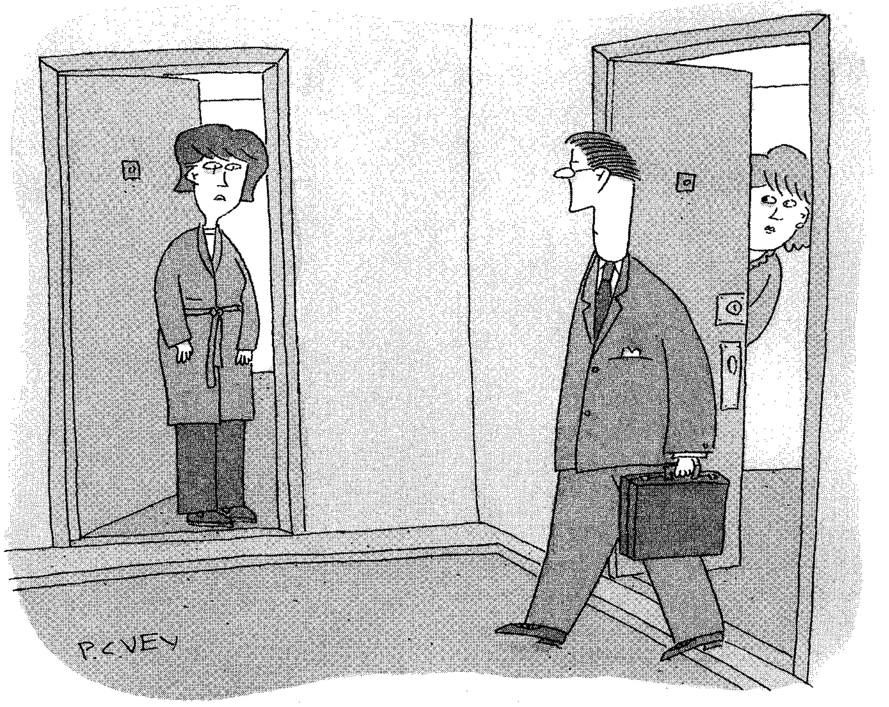
Owens has built a multimillion-dollar business out of a talent for infusing garments with the poignant beauty that resides in imperfection. Courtney Love, the lead singer of Hole, was among the first celebrities to discover Owens, in the late nineties, shortly after he launched his label, which consisted mainly of machine-washed leather jackets, threadbare cashmere T-shirts, and artfully frayed hoodies. "He was so idiosyncratic and such an iconoclast—early," Love says. "You would know someone was cool because they were wearing Rick Owens. Other than Marc Jacobs, he's the only brand I'm going to wear onstage."

In an industry driven by the impulse to allay boredom at all costs—through recourse to sudden color shifts and extreme changes in silhouettes and hemlines—Owens, who studied fine art in Los Angeles but never attended design school, has steadfastly pursued an anti-fashion ethic. His basic look—"drippy" forms in subdued colors that range from "dust" to "dark shadow"—changes little from season to season. He has used the word "monotony" to describe his work and has compared it to Lou Reed's music: "minimal chord changes, and direct." He gives few interviews, does not employ a publicist, and has never advertised his line; yet his diffidence seems only to enhance his cachet among fashion editors and insiders. *Vogue* sponsored his first runway show, in 2002, and that same year he won the C.F.D.A. Perry Ellis Award for Emerging Talent. Since moving to Paris, in 2003, Owens has been embraced by local arbiters of style with a passion rarely accorded a non-homegrown designer, especially an American. As the *Times* recently reported, "French critics laud Mr. Owens's challenging designs. French editors photograph them all constantly. French women buy them with religious fervor." Last fall, Owens won a National Design Award from the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum. He appeared at the ceremony, which was held at the museum, on Fifth Avenue, in a black leather motorcycle jacket, and his speech consisted of a few barely audible sentences, in which he said little more than "Thanks."

As Owens conducted his fitting with Valentine, Lamy appeared in his office carrying a copy of an Italian fashion magazine, which contained a feature on Owens's clothes, titled "Elegance Barbare." Lamy, who is sixty-three and once practiced law in Paris, helps design Owens's line of furs, Palais Royal. (His business now includes, in addition to the fur and furniture lines and the Rick Owens label, for men and women, a line of mid-priced women's wear, Lilies.) Lamy is also the inspiration for many of his designs. A petite, dark-skinned woman with an ageless, elfin face, she was dressed in a black fur vest, thick black tights, and a pair of Owens's "mega-turbo" ankle boots—a high platform wedge with a cloven toe and a leather protrusion at the back of the heel. Her stylishly dishevelled hair was hennaed, her fingers were tattooed in blue ink, and her arms were ringed from wrist to elbow in gold, bone, and ivory bracelets. She approached Owens with tottering steps, trailing a wake of musky perfume and cigarette smoke. She smiled, revealing two gold-plated front teeth, and held out the photo spread. "'Ave you seen zis, Reek?" she asked, in a French



"It's an O.K. phone, but it takes great pictures."



“Howard! You slept in the wrong apartment again.”

accent that is nearly impenetrable despite the fact that she spent twenty-eight years living in Los Angeles, many of them as the owner and hostess of Les Deux Cafés, a popular Hollywood night spot, in the late nineties. (Lamy also performed for her customers, crooning Langston Hughes poems in a raspy voice to the accompaniment of a jazz ensemble.) Owens, who was sewing a complicated fold of drapery on the front of a dress, peered briefly at the magazine, and said, “Huh. I'll have to give that to my mom.” Then he went back to his work.

After Lamy left the room, Owens said that he had known her for two years before he could make out a word she said. They met in Los Angeles and have been together for eighteen years, but have been married only since 2006. Lamy, Owens said, is a “mesmerizing sphinx.” He went on, “I'm so fascinated by someone who acts completely on instinct and feelings, where I'm so pragmatic and sensible and kind of—compared to her—boring and conservative.”

He stood up and watched Valentine strut down the length of the room, a swath of gray-and-white striped silk floating behind her. “In Catholic school, I always loved that aesthetic of all those robes dragging in those dusty temples, with Jesus and the disciples and all that,” he said. “It was very exotic and very alluring to me in my very safe little world of small-town California. When I look around here in the studio, I see wanting to re-create those dusty temples and robes and stuff.”

Owens's parents always come to Paris to attend his shows, and they appeared at his studio that afternoon, after having spent the morning sightseeing and shopping. An only child, Owens was brought up in Porterville, an agricultural town about a hundred and fifty miles north of Los Angeles, where his parents still live. His father, John, retired as a social worker with the local welfare department; his mother, Connie—for Concepción—is from Puebla, Mexico, and worked as a schoolteacher. They met in Mexico, in 1958, when John was teaching English in Puebla, after a stint in college on the G.I. Bill. “My parents are very, very conservative,” Owens told me. “But they're mega-turbo sweet.”

Connie, a striking woman of seventy-five, who has Owens's large, expressive eyes, sat watching her son work for several hours, often sighing appreciatively over his designs. She also took photographs, which she would later assemble into a carefully indexed album. At her home in Porterville, she maintains an archive of more than six hundred magazines that mention Owens. Connie is a gifted seamstress, who, as a young woman, often reproduced, without the aid of patterns, dresses that she saw in shopwindows. She told me that at eighteen Owens, who had just learned to sew, produced a dress with cutouts—a creation so complicated that she had no idea how he had done it. But she disavowed any direct influence on his fashion line. She retrieved a photograph album from her purse. “I dressed him until he was thirteen or fourteen,” she said, pointing to pictures of Owens as a seven-year-old in knee socks and shorts, and as a teen-ager in a brown suit and tie. “I always dressed him like a little gentleman.” Connie added that Owens's memories of this period are not entirely happy. “He always said that Porterville was a prison.”

John Owens, a youthful eighty-six-year-old with a white brush mustache and small blue eyes, spent the afternoon at a laptop computer in a corner of the studio, engaging in vigorous debate on the Internet about affirmative action, abortion, and gay marriage—all of which he opposes. John, who had hoped that his son might become an architect, said that he had had reservations about Owens's career as “a male designer of women's clothing.” The two had many conflicts when Owens was growing up but have drawn closer as Owens has become successful. “He's the most adorable Nazi,” Owens told me. “What can I do about it? I don't want to patronize him by saying it's amusing, but I can't help but laugh at, like, the contrast between him and me.”

Still, tensions persist. Two days later, on the day of Owens's show, more than a dozen runway models arrived at the studio for a final fitting. John shook his head. “These aren't my type of women at all,” he said. “I like them a lot curvier—shapely.” Owens, overhearing, asked him to repeat what he'd said.

“I said, ‘Some of these models need to eat something,’ ” John told him.

After a pause, Owens said, “Oh,” and turned away.

John went on, in a voice loud enough for Owens to hear, saying that he respected his son's "discipline and determination," but that his clothes are "too avant-garde for me." He added, "Rick is the rebel. He's a born nonconformist. I feel he's rebelling against some of the wrong things. What he rebels against is the establishment."

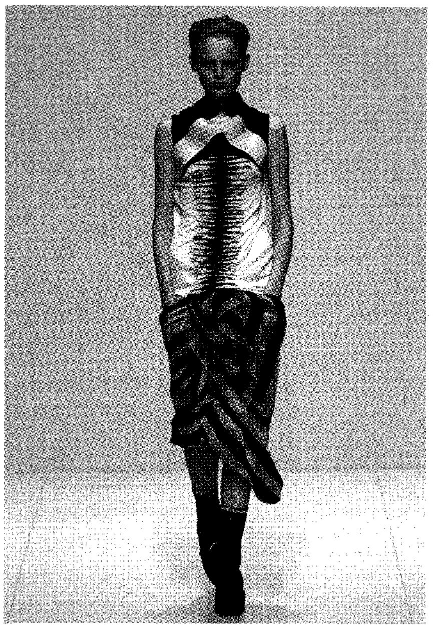
Owens's upbringing was by no means conventional, despite his parents' conservatism. His father's interests ranged from Buddhism to astrology, and he did not allow a television in the house until Owens was sixteen. He required his son to read canonical works of literature and philosophy—Marcus Aurelius, Aristotle, Confucius—and to listen to classical music. "I developed this method of child-rearing after reading Thomas Wolfe's statement 'You can't go home again,'" John told me. "I always interpreted that to mean it's because you outgrow things. Well, I always wanted to expose Rick to things he couldn't grow out of."

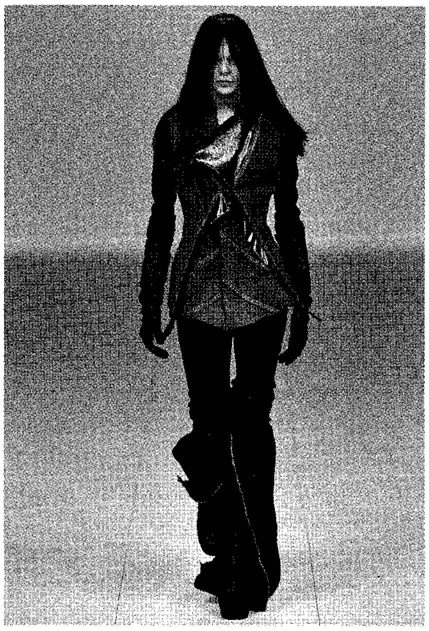
As a boy, Owens often resented this regimen of enforced cultural appreciation, but he has since come to value it. "I have so much to be grateful for because of that," he told me. "No TV, and all those books and records. It's like we were on a desert island in Porterville, and all we had was Debussy, Wagner, Proust, Huysmans, Pierre Loti. And they were stored in the basement, like a bunker. There's something very insulated about that life that has stayed with me. Because my life is still like that: I don't go outside of my personal interests, my personal nucleus of people, much." Owens attributes elements of his fashion aesthetic to the art and literature that his father exposed him to—and he has tried to convince John of this. "I told him, 'The reason I'm so into this is because I remember you showing me Japanese haiku and Japanese images, books of Japanese pictures; that's why I have this austerity that appeals to me,'" Owens recalled. "I always loved how the Japanese appreciated things that were damaged; they would elevate the idea of something damaged and make it beautiful, and I said, 'That is so all about what I am. And that's because of you.'"

Owens attended Catholic school from first grade through seventh grade. "It offered me an element of exoticism in my life," he said. "I prayed earnestly. I don't think I ever really rejected it violently. After a while, I just kind of thought, Oh, that wasn't really for me, was it?" He liked high school much less and skipped many classes to smoke pot and listen to Led Zeppelin with friends. He graduated in 1979 and moved to Los Angeles, where he studied fine arts at the Otis-Parsons Art Institute. He was captivated by the work of the conceptual artist Joseph Beuys. "He was my first big idol, because it was all about insulation and protection, and it was very military, kind of," Owens said. But he soon realized that he lacked the discipline that he believed was necessary to become an artist. "I got intimidated by it," he said. "It was too intense—like entering the priesthood."

He left Otis-Parsons after two years, to study pattern-cutting at a trade college. He began creating costumes and sets for local artists and performers, members of what he has called "the wicked Hollywood hustler-bar world." For four years, he worked in knockoff houses in Los Angeles, copying in cheap fabrics the work of well-known fashion designers. The experience proved invaluable. Many designers never master the difficult art of pattern-cutting, and the originality and sophistication of Owens's clothes—his ability to plant seams in unexpected places and to hang fabrics on the bias so that the cross grain clings to or drapes dramatically from the body—derive from his years in the knockoff mills. "Picasso did classic figure drawing in the beginning, and then, after that, he abstracted," Owens told me. "You can't convincingly get abstract until you really know the fundamentals. It's the same thing with pattern-making. You can't start distorting things unless you kind of know what you're doing." As Cathy Horyn wrote last week in the *Times*, in an admiring review of Owens's Fall 2008 collection, "A designer who controls his pattern making can say the most with his clothes. It's just like a writer with language."

In 1988, Owens's boyfriend at the time helped him obtain a job as a pattern-cutter at a Los Angeles sportswear company owned by Lamy, who also owned a





From top: Courtney Love, one of Owens's first celebrity buyers; looks from his Spring and Fall 2008 collections.

French bistro, Café des Artistes. She had married an experimental filmmaker, Richard Newton, and had a daughter, Scarlett. Owens worked for two years at Lamy's company before they began an affair. Owens left his boyfriend, Lamy left her husband, and they moved in together. Strapped for cash, they stayed in cheap hotels, including one that Owens's friend the intersex multimedia artist Vaginal Davis calls a "fist-fuck hotel," off Hollywood Boulevard. Owens and Lamy drank and used drugs prolifically, inspired in part by the rock musicians they admired—Iggy Pop, Keith Richards, and David Bowie. "It's also Baudelaire and Tennessee Williams," Owens said. "It's just the whole idea of excess and the phrase 'A candle that burns at both ends might burn shorter, but it burns brighter.'" Lamy, Owens says, was "an enthusiastic drinker," but, he adds, "she never went as deep as I did and was the one to call the private nurses when I got too bad."

Owens and Lamy have been sober for more than a decade, but his memories of that time continue to influence his work. "I want it to look used and damaged, and I think that's why women over forty relate," he said. "We all dabbled in drugs. We had moments of beauty but also times of problems. It's not a sparkling disco minidress that's shiny and silver and perfect and holding everything in place. Life is not like that." Last fall, Owens published a book of photographs, "L'Ai-Je Bien Descendu?" ("How Was My Descent?"), which includes a self-portrait that shows him slumped, shirtless, at a table in front of a bottle of vodka and a handgun. Another image shows him with the gun's barrel in his mouth and blood—which Owens later painted in—exploding from the back of his head. He regards the suicide photograph as an homage to his days as a drug user and had it printed on a silk scarf, which sells for about ninety dollars at his boutique in the Palais Royal, near the Louvre.

Even during his most dissolute period, Owens never doubted that he would eventually leave the knockoff business and create his own line. "I just assumed that I'd do this for a while, then I'd do my own thing," he said. In 1994, when he was sober, he bought inexpensive fabric remnants—silk georgette, cotton ribs, cotton jersey—at a downtown jobber and, after washing and dying them, sculpted them into unexpectedly sophisticated T-shirts, skirts, and dresses. Perhaps the most upscale stores in Los Angeles was Maxfield, on Melrose Avenue, which specialized in clothes by experimental designers like Yohji Yamamoto and Comme des Garçons. Owens brought his clothes to Maxfield, but the store's buyer wasn't available to look at them. "So I went to the next best store, Charles Gallay"—the first retailer in Los Angeles to carry Versace, Montana, Mugler, and Martin Margiela (designers known for what Owens calls "the really extreme stuff"). Gallay arranged an exclusive deal with Owens. "I said, 'I'm broke. Can you pay fifty per cent up front?' And they did," Owens recalled. "That's how I did it. I never got an insurance policy, I never had employment benefits, I didn't do taxes, I didn't take out a loan. I had one sewer full time and then two sewers when it was more of a crunch. I was barely, barely surviving and we weren't making that many clothes, but I had no overhead, so I was able to do it." A few years later, when the Charles Gallay store closed, Owens negotiated an exclusive deal with Tommy Perse, the owner of Maxfield.

Lisa Love, a West Coast editor of *Vogue*, says that Owens's move from Gallay to Maxfield coincided with a change in his work. "At Maxfield, he moved into the more high-end fabrics and the more tortured designs, draping leathers and cashmeres and fur, and making these incredible T-shirts," Love said. "The cashmeres were so luxurious, but then he would throw them in a pot of dye. I mean, no one treats fabric like that. Machine-washing the leather! Los Angeles was and is, mostly, a very jeans kind of world. But his stuff was different from stuff that was coming out of Los Angeles. And New York, too, for that matter. Very body-hugging, clingy, not conventional. It was Morticia-like—witchy at the same time as elegant and goth. Street, but it looked so great on so many women."

By this time, Owens and Lamy were living in a former five-and-dime storefront on Las Palmas, a gritty side street off Hollywood Boulevard. They stripped the interior walls and ceilings to the plaster and furnished their rooms with a thrift-store version of Owens's Beuys-inspired beds and couches, using flannel Army blankets and cashmere to drape the walls and windows. The sidewalks in front of their building were a gathering place for runaways, transsexual hookers, and drug addicts, who provided Owens with a constant source of inspiration.

In the early nineties, Lamy's sportswear company declared bankruptcy, and she devoted her attention to Café des Artistes, which became so successful that, in 1997, she opened a larger restaurant, across the street from their home on Las Palmas. She bought a crumbling former crack house and the adjoining parking lot and turned them into a vine-draped bistro that she called Les Deux Cafés. The restaurant was popular with directors and actors, including Oliver Stone, Quentin Tarantino, Paul Thomas Anderson, and Nicole Kidman. "It wasn't this weird, new, celebrity-for-celebrity's-sake nonsense that you have now," Courtney Love, who was also a regular, told me. "The vibe was just cooler." Lamy, dressed in clothes by Owens, often performed the duties of hostess. "She looked cool," Love recalled. "I asked her, 'Who made that skirt?' " Soon, Love and other celebrities were visiting Owens's studio, across the street. His sleazily glamorous leather jacket, which had ribbing along the inner seams of the arms to make them hug the body, was particularly prized by Lamy's customers. It managed to seem both luxurious and casual, an effect that Owens achieved by machine-washing and tumble-drying the leather until it resembled desiccated skin. "It was real popular with rockers or people willing to take that kind of chance," Love said. "Androgynous women and power lesbians." Owens's jacket and his tattered T-shirts began to appear in photo spreads in art and fashion magazines.

In 1998, Julie Gilhart, the fashion director at Barneys, saw a photograph of an Owens T-shirt in an obscure fashion magazine whose name she no longer recalls. Gilhart had no idea how to contact Owens, but she tore out the page and kept it on her desk. A year later, Barneys' creative director, Simon Doonan, who had been a window dresser at

TOP: ERIC RYAN/GETTY IMAGES; MIDDLE AND BOTTOM: FIRSTVIEW.COM

Maxfield, told Gilhart that Owens lived in Los Angeles. Gilhart began to buy his line for Barneys, where it became a top seller. I was in Barneys last spring when a shipment arrived on the fifth floor. The rest of the store was nearly empty, but women crowded four deep to get at Owens's clothes and bought four or five pieces each. (Prices range from two hundred and fifty dollars for a ribbed tank top to seven thousand seven hundred and forty-five dollars for a watersnake jacket.) I mentioned what I'd seen to Gilhart, who said that it was hardly unusual. "I love Rick because he's so perfectly Barneys," she told me. "He doesn't advertise, he isn't all over the magazines, yet he appeals to a luxury customer. Even though he's not seen as a luxury brand, he is. He's the essence of insider exclusivity."

In 2003, Henri Bendel, the Fifth Avenue department store, created a Rick Owens salon on its top floor. "Anyone who loved Rick would be up there looking through the racks," Sally Singer, the fashion-news director at *Vogue*, told me. "You always thought it would go on sale, and it wouldn't, because people would buy it at full price." Singer was among the first members of the fashion establishment to promote Owens's work. She lives in the Chelsea Hotel—where she recently held a candlelit dinner for Owens and fifty friends and admirers—but as a teen-ager she spent time in Los Angeles. "I know the clubs and the music that he cared about, and the kind of goth, speed-metal, slightly distressed, and worn edge that he brings to luxurious things," she told me. "But I think I also really respond to the classical imagery in his clothes. This is a deeply cultured person putting out these things. He knows the history of armor, he knows the history of draping, and the Grecian stuff."

By 2001, Owens's business had grown too large for him to continue producing clothes in his home studio. So he signed a deal with EBA, an Italian sales agency, now a division of Naxeco, that had represented other avant-garde designers, mainly Europeans, including Olivier Theyskens and Ann Demeulemeester. EBA's president, Luca Ruggeri, and its C.E.O., Ruggeri's sister-in-law, Elsa Lanzo, were introduced to Owens's work by a French buyer. "He was doing something completely different—what we would wear," Ruggeri, a tall man who often dresses in Owens's menswear line of distressed-leather jackets and sharp-shouldered blazers, told me. EBA helped Owens find a manufacturer for his clothes and sold them to stores, and in 2003 Owens became the agency's principal client. "They didn't know me very well at the beginning, and it wasn't a very big collection—maybe twelve pieces—so nobody asked that many questions, because it wasn't a big investment," Owens said. "It went well, so, as we grew, nobody questioned what I wanted to do, or how much money I was going to spend." Even now, Owens told me, Ruggeri and Lanzo don't see the clothes until the week before they start selling them. "We don't talk about it, I don't show them anything," Owens said. "They're both incredible," he added. "I couldn't be luckier."

Owens's arrangement with EBA was considered unusual at the time. "At that moment, all the drama in fashion was about how to join a conglomerate," Singer told me. "Who was getting the

HISTORY

It's like this, the king marries
a commoner, and the populace cheers.
She doesn't even know how to curtsy,
but he loves her manners in bed.
Why doesn't the king do what his father did,
the king's mother wonders—
those peasant girls brought in
through that secret entrance, that's how
a kingdom works best. But marriage!
The king's mother won't come out
of her room, and a strange democracy
radiates throughout the land,
which causes widespread dreaming,
a general hopefulness. This is,
of course, how people get hurt,
how history gets its ziggy shape.
The king locks his wife in the tower
because she's begun to ride
her horse far into the woods.
How unqueenly to come back
to the castle like that,
so sweaty and flushed. The only answer,
his mother decides, is stricter rules—
no whispering in the corridors,
no gaiety in the fields.
The king announces his wife is very tired
and has decided to lie down,
and issues an edict that all things yours
are once again his.
This is the kind of law
history loves, which contains
its own demise. The villagers conspire
for years, waiting for the right time,
which never arrives. There's only
that one person, not exactly brave,
but too unhappy to be reasonable,
who crosses the moat, scales the walls.

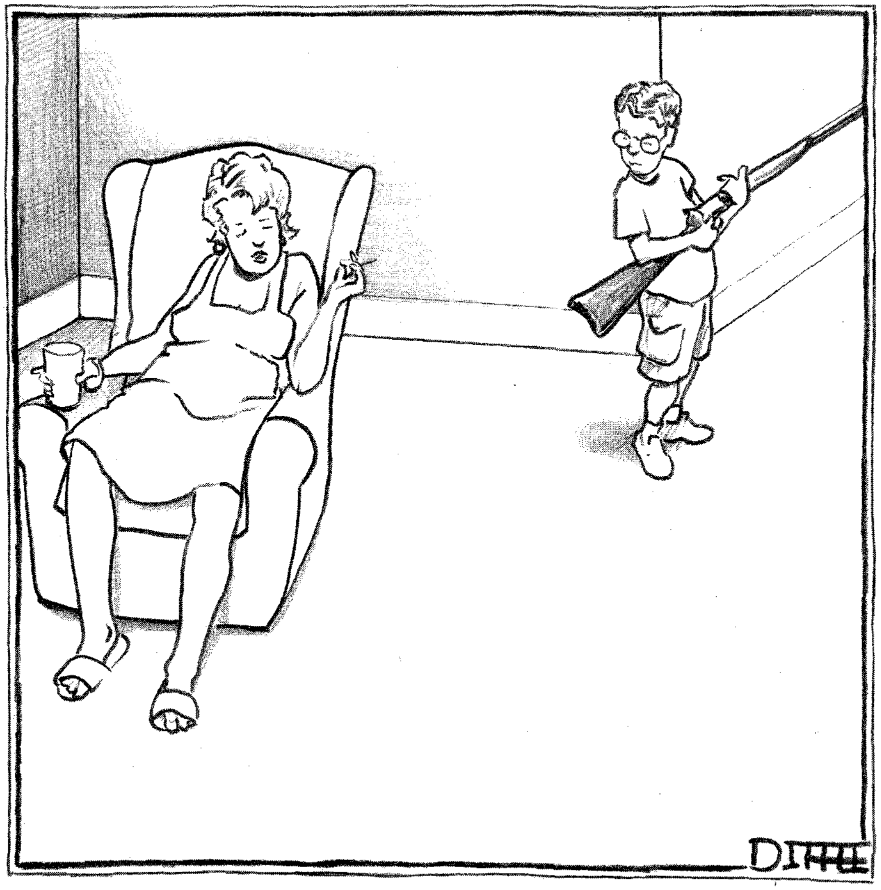
—*Stephen Dunn*

big jobs, who was taking over the big houses, who was going to get backing from the Gucci Group. Stella McCartney signed up, Alexander McQueen signed up, Balenciaga was bought by Gucci." In the fall of 2001, Singer included Owens in a story that she wrote for *Vogue* about a small group of mostly European designers who had refused to sell their labels to a conglomerate, and she arranged to have Owens photographed by Annie Leibovitz. In the image, he appears shirtless, in unbuttoned black jeans, on the edge of a bed in a low-rent motel room. Standing next to him is his friend Kembra Pfahler, the lead singer of the New York punk band the Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black, dressed in a classic Owens ensemble: an intricately gathered, floor-length, sand-colored skirt and a long-sleeved T-shirt. In order to persuade Anna Wintour, the editor of *Vogue*, to feature Owens prominently in the magazine, Singer and Love arranged for him to visit Wintour at her suite at the Ritz, in Paris. "He came with a long Army duffelbag full of clothes, and a model, and he just pulled them out one after another and put them on the model in front of Anna," Singer recalled. "It was eight or nine in the morning. We had this fantasy that that was an early hour for Rick Owens. I don't actually know if it was."

Wintour published the Leibovitz photograph as a double-page spread, and five months later *Vogue* sponsored Owens's first fashion show, in New York. Within a few months, Owens had won a Perry Ellis Award, and the following year he was hired as the artistic director for Revillon Frères, the Paris fur company, founded in 1723. The label, like many other upscale furriers, had attracted a following in the nineteen-seventies and eighties but had since declined in popularity. Owens, for his first collection, which he presented in the summer of 2003, made puffy ski jackets lined with sable, coats trimmed with hand-knotted ostrich feathers, and a jacket with a mink torso, fox sleeves, and a goat-and-horsetail fringe. "Just as surely as John Galliano smashed the restrained, bourgeois image at Dior, Owens knocked the stuffing and the stuffiness out of furs," Suzy Menkes, the influential fashion critic for the *International Herald Tribune*, wrote in a review. (In 2006, Revillon was sold and Owens left the company. Last year, he launched his own fur line, Palais Royal.)

With each new favorable notice, Owens seems more determined to prove his independence from the fashion establishment. In May, 2002, he published a grainy, black-and-white self-portrait in the British magazine *i-D*, in which he appeared on all fours, clad only in a pair of black leather chaps. Facing him, in a crudely pieced-together double exposure, was another image of him, urinating into his doppelgänger's mouth. The photograph, as Guy Trebay noted in the *Times*, was not likely to appear in *Vogue* "during any of our lives." In 2006, Owens opened his boutique in the Palais Royal—the enclosed arcade where Louis XIV lived as a boy—and later installed, near the front windows, overlooking the colonnade, a life-size, anatomically correct nude wax sculpture of himself, made by artisans who supply works to Madame Tussauds. The sculpture, which Owens showed at a trade fair in Florence, was equipped with tubing enabling it to release a jet of fake urine. Owens refrained from activating the pee function when he installed the work in his store, and he draped the figure in a black velvet cloak. Even so, he says, "anyone who expresses interest can see what's under the cape." He doesn't worry that his provocativeness will alienate customers or critics. "I know I'm not everybody's cup of tea," he told me, "and I don't want to be."

On the morning of the day of Owens's Spring 2008 show, about twenty models arrived at his studio for a final fitting. A makeup artist and a hairdresser discussed with him how to arrange the models' faces and hair. His chief stylist, Panos Yiapanis, and his assistant, Asha Mines, collected photographs of the models in their respective looks, which they tacked to a large board. As the mood in the studio grew more frantic, Justinian Kfoury, a fashion agent and a friend of Owens's from Los Angeles, announced that the "kadringle" had begun—his term for the frenzy, fuelled by adrenaline and terror, that invariably precedes a runway show. The only per-



"Sweetheart, use your inside gun."

son who seemed immune to the kadringle was Owens. He strolled calmly through the studio, answering questions in his unhurried California drawl.

Not far away, at the École des Beaux-Arts, workers hung lights above a central runway in the main hall—a soaring space with a curved glass ceiling and, on the upper walls, reproductions of murals by Michelangelo. Around four o'clock, Owens's models assembled backstage, at the foot of a wide flight of stairs. Their long hair was rolled and pinned under in high buns, and smoothed away from their foreheads to create an aerodynamic effect. Their faces were made to look pale with foundation, and their eyebrows concealed with makeup. Photographers, fashion reporters, and friends of Owens's gathered on a landing at the top of the stairs. A reporter from the *Times* interviewed Owens's father. "I'm enjoying the reflected glory of being Rick Owens's parent!" he exclaimed afterward.

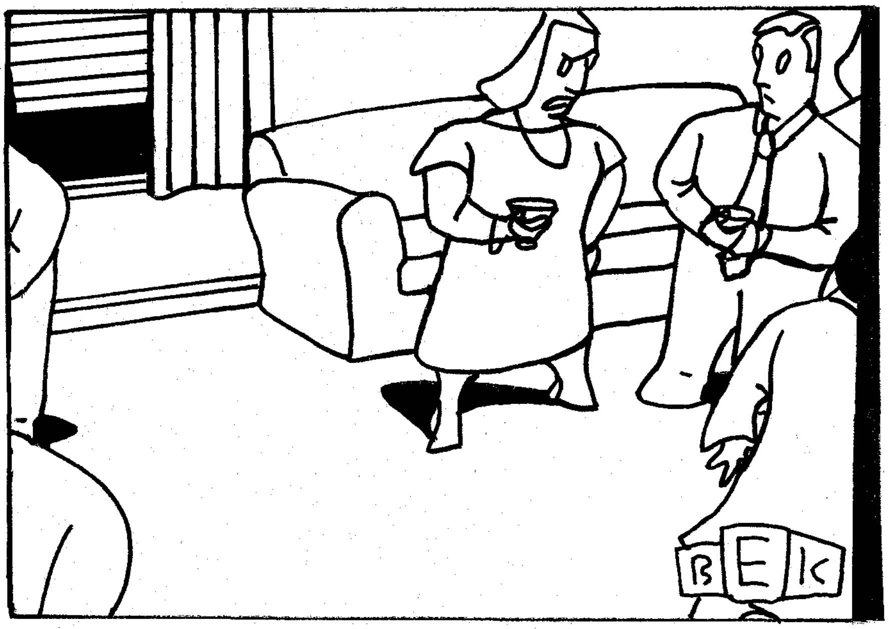
Owens arrived at about five o'clock and lingered near the runway, watching as the technicians finished installing the lights. He was dressed in black jeans, a long, dark, military-style coat, and a pair of boots with five-inch heels. Gazing around the room, he considered his career. "I don't know if anyone can start the way I did anymore," he said. "There are so many designers now—they're the new rock bands." Then he joined Yiapanis and Mines backstage, where they were helping the models into the clothes. Apart from a few who were wearing Owens's narrow black leather jackets, most of the models were dressed in tunics and droopy shorts made from layers of semi-transparent organza and gazar, a loosely woven silk fabric printed with a pattern of gray and white stripes that Owens had designed on a computer. The tunics were wrapped around the models' torsos like Möbius strips or stiffly folded origami. All the models wore Owens's mega-turbo boots, along with black socks emblazoned across the top with the title of the collection: Creatch, short for "creature," a nickname that Owens's friends gave him as a teen-ager. The flowing yet rigorously structured tunics reflected Owens's love of early-twentieth-century designers such as Vionnet, Fortuny, and Grès, and the low-slung shorts conjured skater street wear. When I asked Owens about his inspiration for the collection, he said, "I just *think, Elegant monsters.*"

At 6:30 P.M., the soundtrack began to play from beyond a high white scrim separating the backstage area from the runway. Despite his enthusiasm for Iggy, Bowie, American heavy metal, and German opera, Owens says that he dislikes the "frantic" music that many designers use at shows, and he had chosen a piece by a London-based techno musician called Rex the Dog. He had asked a friend to slow the music to half speed—to one beat per second. "I hope it'll force people to slow their eye and look at the clothing," he told me. Owens said that the clanging, distorted electronic noise that filled the hall sounded to him "kind of like a stoned ice-cream truck." As the models hurried to form a line before stepping onto the runway, Owens, who had removed his coat and was wearing a black wife-beater T-shirt, stood at the edge of the scrim, just out of view of the audience, and adjusted each outfit.

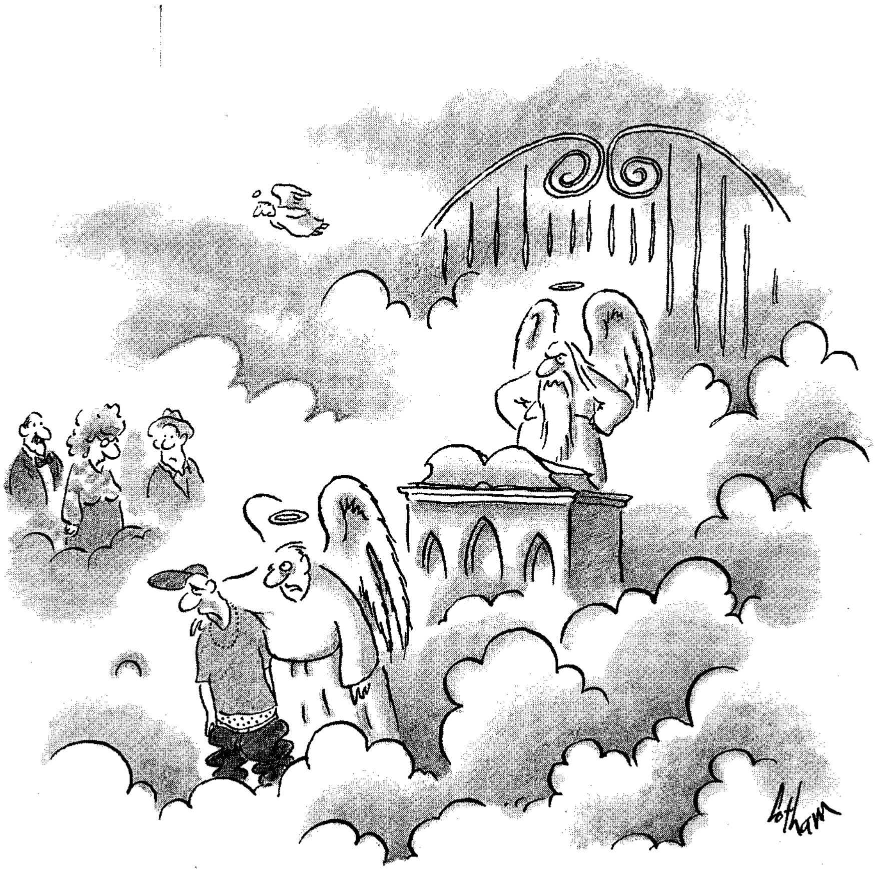
The collection had taken Owens months to conceive and manufacture. The show lasted fifteen minutes. Afterward, fans appeared backstage to congratulate him. Courtney Love, wearing a Rick Owens black leather jacket lined in white shearling and his mega-turbo boots, embraced him. But Owens didn't linger. Accompanied by Lamy and his parents, he soon left the building to attend a party hosted by the vintage-clothing retailer Didier Ludot, in front of his boutique in the colonnade at the Palais Royal. Owens stayed at the party for only a few minutes, then left to have dinner at Davé, a claustrophobic Chinese restaurant that serves middling food but has, for more than twenty years, attracted top designers and fashion power brokers. "If you look at all the photographs on the walls, it's all Lagerfeld and everybody," Owens said. "I was a little intimidated, and I never would have gone if Michèle hadn't made me go. You know, Michèle doesn't care about anything."

Owens and his party, which included Gareth Pugh, a twenty-six-year-old British designer of punk- and glam-inspired clothing, whom Lamy had started promoting, were seated at a coveted table near the restaurant's entrance. At the next table, to Owens's unrestrained excitement, was the Japanese designer Rei Kawakubo. A few minutes after Owens's group sat down, Courtney Love arrived. She pulled up a chair, squeezed in beside John Owens, and began to describe an abortive plan to buy Kate Moss's house in London. But no one was listening. John Owens's spoon had gone missing, and he was complaining vociferously. Owens tried to flag down a waiter.

"Do you want to hear my Kate Moss story?" Love said, with exasperation.



"What does he have to be falsely humble about?"



"Try coming back tomorrow with your pants pulled up."

"Yeah," Owens replied, looking under napkins and scanning the floor. "But we've got to get Dad's spoon settled."

A new spoon was procured from Davé Chung, the restaurant's owner, and Love finished her anecdote. ("I couldn't buy the house when I saw that Kate's walk-in closet was bigger than her kid's bedroom!") Soon, she and John Owens were deep in conversation about a psychological disorder that John had been reading about on the Internet. "It's a condition called apotemnophilia," he explained. "It's a compulsion people feel to have parts of their body surgically amputated. Arms. Legs. Apparently, it is driven by certain sexual compulsions."

Love nodded enthusiastically. "Well, you know Syd Barrett? One of the original members of Pink Floyd?"

"No, I don't believe I do," John said.

"Well, he was amazing," Love said. "Great, great musician. But he went completely crazy and ate his own fingers off." (Barrett was known to have exhibited psychotic behavior, but biographies make no mention of him having eaten his digits.)

John considered this for a moment. Then he said, "I'm not sure that that, technically, would qualify as a true case of apotemnophilia."

Owens, who had been eavesdropping on the conversation, fought back laughter. Later, he told me how much he had relished the sight of his father and Love together at Davé—and Rei Kawakubo just inches away. "That's when I think, My life is perfect," Owens said.

Before the dinner broke up, Love announced that she planned to be "highly selective" in her attendance at the rest of the fashion shows that week. "But I have to come and support Rick," she said. "I always support Rick."

John looked puzzled. "Support?" he said. "How do you mean? You put money—?"

"She means emotionally, Dad," Owens interrupted.

"Oh," John said, and resumed eating.

Fashion Week was not quite over for Owens. Four nights later, he attended the opening for his furniture line, at the Galerie Philippe Jousse, on the Left Bank. Owens's parents drove with him to the gallery in a chauffeured S.U.V. John, who was sitting in the back seat, asked Owens how his fashion show had been received by the critics.

"Well," Owens replied, "Suzy Menkes seemed to like it quite a bit." (This was typical understatement. Menkes had written a rave review, in which she complimented Owens for achieving new elegance and sophistication without sacrificing his street edge.)

"Any criticisms at all, Rick?" John asked.

"Are you looking for any?" Owens replied.

"Well," John said. "Yeah."

"I'm afraid not, Dad," Owens said with a chuckle. A moment later, he added, "Well, Style.com didn't like the low-crotch pants much."

"I see," John said. But there was no note of triumph in his voice. "I always worry about the possibility of him losing his touch," he had told me a few days earlier. In 2004, Owens was offered ten million dollars for his label, and John worried that his son had done the wrong thing by saying no. "You get to those figures, and you have to give it some serious thought," John said. "If you sell out, you don't have to worry about it, you're set for life." I later repeated John's comment to Owens, who smiled. "And that's why me and my dad, much as I love him, will always never quite see eye to eye on things," he said.

At the Galerie Jousse, men and women, dressed in Rick Owens designs, chatted among pieces from his furniture line—an unsettling collection of cube-shaped chairs, sofas, and side tables upholstered in mink, sable, and felt, some of them decorated with deer antlers. Owens stood in a corner, surrounded by friends, including Love. Someone suggested that the group have dinner at Brasserie Lipp. Owens approached his parents, who were sitting on one of his couches, a long benchlike piece upholstered in glossy mink.

"Everybody wants to go to Brasserie Lipp," Owens told them, sitting down between his father and his mother. "It's so hip and fabulous," he added wearily. "Can we just go home?"

His parents said yes. ♦

FICTION

RAJ, BOHEMIAN

BY HARI KUNZRU

We liked to do things casually. We called at the last minute. We messaged one another from our hand-held devices. Sometimes our names were on exclusive guest lists (though we were poor, we were beautiful, and people liked to have us around), but often we preferred to do something else—attend a friend's opening, drink in after-hours clubs or the room above a pub, trek off to remote suburbs to see a band play in a warehouse. We went dancing whenever we felt like it (none of us had regular jobs), and when we didn't we stayed in, watching movies and getting high. Someone always had something new or special—illegal pre-releases of Hollywood blockbusters, dubs of 8-mm. shorts from the nineteen-seventies. We watched next summer's exploding airplanes, Viennese Actionists masturbating onto operating tables. Raw meat and Nick Cage. Whatever we watched was, by definition, good, because we'd watched it, because it had belonged—at least, temporarily—to us. By the time the wider world caught up—which always happened, sooner or later—we'd usually got bored and moved on. We had long since given up mourning the loss of our various enthusiasms. We'd learned to discard them lightly. It was the same with clubs and bars. Wherever we went would be written about in magazines three or four months later. A single mention on a blog, and a place that had been spangled with beautiful, interesting faces would be swamped by young bankers in button-down shirts, nervously analyzing the room to see if they were having fun.

I must make it clear that we didn't plan for our lives to be this way. We despised trendies—fashion kids who tried too hard, perennially hoping to get hosed down by the paps or interviewed about their hair. With us, it wasn't a neurotic thing. We put on public events—salons, gigs, parties, shows. But once in a while, in the midst of our hectic social gyrations, we liked to do something for one another, something that didn't drain our energy, that made us feel private again.

My friend Sunita had a sense of theatre. She loved formality, intrigue. She had a certain archaic style, which would have been pompous or tediously ironic if it hadn't been for her cracked sense of humor, her painful, charming earnestness. For Sunita, the world was a kind of tragic game. When she threw one of her dinner parties, there were hand-made invitations, a dress code. Once, she held a surrealist dinner, all diving suits and lobsters, over which she presided in a sheer green dress that was almost completely transparent. Another time, her theme was war. You might think it bad taste to hold a war-themed dinner party—now, of all times—but Sunita pulled it off. We arrived carrying toy guns, wearing helmets daubed with bloodthirsty slogans. Some of us sniggered; others muttered about our hostess's poor taste. Yet somehow the evening, which should have been ludicrous, took on an unexpected aura of profundity. How? Sunita turned it into a wake. We raised our glasses to the millions of dead, to all the people who had had to endure what we merely watched on television. We had escaped, and we felt very guilty about it. Our childish carnival costumes were a sign of our shame. Donkeys' ears, dunces' caps.

When word got around that Sunita was holding another dinner, people immediately started angling for invitations. Everyone knew that she and I were close. Friends called, more or less begging me to get them in. I had to apologize and say that there was nothing I could do. It was a rule, an unofficial rule: no liggers and no hangers-on.

Sunita lived in an old textile warehouse, a big, echoing building that was due to be converted into apartments. It had pools of water in the basement and a goods lift that clanked its way up to the third floor, where she'd set up home, plumbing in a kitchen and partitioning off a bedroom and a bathroom. The main space was a studio where she made her drawings, ramified patterns of abstract nested lines that had grown, in the time I'd known her, from tiny quadrants smaller than a paperback into huge things that rambled over sheets of paper in uncertain arcs. The landlord, a Greek named Constantine who had a dozen other properties in the area, was waiting for the market to improve before he redeveloped. In the meantime, Sunita lived rent-free. She and Constantine had some kind of deal; I never knew the details. I would occasionally find him there when I went to visit, a portly man in a cashmere coat, sitting at her huge pine table shelling pistachios. He often brought nuts, sometimes cherries or boxes of gluey sweets. Sunita seemed able to handle him well enough.

The card for Sunita's latest dinner was minimal: a thick piece of cream-colored paper, with the words "Eating Is Honest" printed in an old-fashioned cursive font. Date and time, address, the cryptic instruction "Dress sincerely." I spent a long time debating what to wear. Sunita was typically tight-lipped about how her theme should be interpreted. "No, I won't help you," she said. "You know it would ruin everything." So I phoned around. No one had a clue. Vikram was his usual scatological self. "Toilets," he said. "She's going to do the thing out of the Buñuel film with the toilets. She's going to make all of us take a shit around a dining table and then eat in little locked cubicles."

I ended up adopting a sort of ironic nerd look, with thick, plastic-framed glasses and a clip-on tie. I wasn't very satisfied with it. I considered wearing my "own" clothes, on the ground that it would have been the most sincere response—to dress as if there were no dress code—but I couldn't work out what the most neutral choice would be. How to let everyone know that not only was I myself, I was *expressing* myself? Damn Sunita, I thought. Damn her clever ideas.

When I arrived at the warehouse, I found that she'd transformed the place into a kind of kitsch Christian heaven. White sheets were draped over the walls. A long table was arrayed with flowers and candelabra and lavish silver platters of food. When you got up close, you saw that it was all aluminum foil and spray paint, but by candlelight the scene looked sumptuous, romantic. Next to each place setting was a little hand mirror. Evidently, self-examination was part of the rubric. A number of old-fashioned medical illustrations were tacked incongruously on the wall, demonstrating the digestive system. Sunita was dressed in a white linen shift, and welcomed us with a short speech that, as far as I could tell, was composed of cut-up extracts from diet books. The food was simple and plain—fruit, cheeses, loaves of crusty bread—and while we ate it there was a program of entertainment. Michel read several of his poems. Hengist and Horsa played folk songs. A woman called Kevin did some kind of improvised dance, a flurry of arm-swirling that made me feel

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embarrassed and slightly uncomfortable. I took that as a good sign. If a piece of art makes me uncomfortable or, better still, angry, that seems to be a reason to pay attention to it.

It was all very pure and calming, an atmosphere that Faye de Way (when we finally managed to steer her away from the perennial topic of her operation) labelled "Baroque detox." If that was the effect our hostess was shooting for, it was slightly spoiled by her guests, who were all smoking like chimneys. "Chew twenty times!" Sunita admonished. "Once for each person at the table." I was seated next to Thanh, who'd cut her hair into a fringe. She looked like a Vietnamese Nico. I told her she was an inscrutable Oriental, and she told me I was a round-eyed pervert who would cry like a little baby when she cut my cock off. How we laughed! I was in a beautiful place, surrounded by talented people. No one was showing off, no one was being pushy, but somehow everyone shone. For one night, we were glorious.

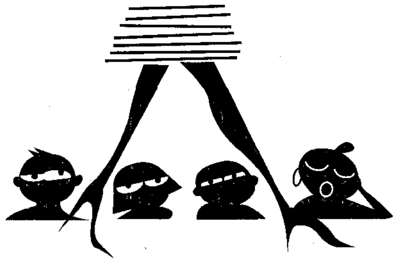
Gradually, we all swapped chairs, clustering in groups to chat. Vikram stood by the record player, putting on seven-inch singles. The table, which had looked so pristine, was strewn with a wreckage of empty bottles and ashtrays and plastic cups. Sunita sat down beside me and asked if I was enjoying myself. I told her I was. She hugged me and I kissed her on the lips. "You should save that for Thanh," she warned. "If you're not careful, Raj will get hold of her."

Raj was one of the few people at the party that I didn't know. He was good-looking, in that conventional way which seems to sabotage any chance of depth or credibility in a person. Are handsome men doomed to become skin-care-obsessed dullards simply because no one talks to them about serious things? Or are looks linked in some genetic way to intelligence? Raj's hair was gelled and teased into spikes. He wore a fussy beard, shaved into a fine line around the contours of his jaw. He was flirting with Thanh, which annoyed me, since I'd weighed things up and decided that I definitely wanted to go home with her. Still, I swallowed my distaste—after all, the guy was a friend of Sunita's—and was gratified to find that when I moved over to sit beside Thanh he ceded possession graciously enough.

As we chatted, I decided that he was actually rather charming. He even ventured an occasional shot at self-deprecation, which I certainly hadn't expected from someone like him. He'd brought along several bottles of vodka, an unfamiliar brand. He poured a shot for each of us, telling us that he'd just discovered it and rhapsodizing about how fragrant it was, how smooth. We talked about a number of other things—I can't remember what—and he took a few pictures with his phone, which I thought was lame. I mean, if you're too busy recording the experience, are you actually having it in the first place? I came away thinking that he was all right. A little suburban, a little bland, but sweet enough.

As I'd hoped, I went home with Thanh, and for a few weeks my memories of Sunita's party were filtered through my new relationship with her. We'd lie for hours on a rug on her studio floor, fucking and listening to music. One evening, while she got dressed to go back to the boyfriend with whom she had a complex but live-in relationship, I was idly typing our names into a search engine—sort of the digital equivalent of scratching initials into the trunk of a tree—when I came across a picture of the two of us, arms around each other, our cheeks mashed together as we blew kisses at the camera. In the foreground was a vodka bottle. For a moment, I couldn't work out where the photograph had been taken. Then, to my surprise, I realized that it was from Sunita's party. The site it was on was a corporate advertorial affair called something like Get-the-Taste, or Feel-the-Refreshment. There was a competition and an unpopulated "community." Across the screen scrolled similar photos of sexy young things in social situations, always with the vodka bottle in the shot. None of the pictures seemed posed.

It took me a minute or two to put it together, and when I did I wasn't happy. The bastard. The two-faced little fucker. Raj had been getting paid to take those pictures. He'd come to our party, and



not just any party, to Sunita's party, the most beautiful gathering imaginable, and he'd shamelessly used it to sell us—to sell me—a product. The more I thought about it, the more angry I became. All that trash about the vodka being smooth: his whole conversation had been a sales pitch. It was creepy. More than creepy. It was sinister. Furious, I told Thanh to come over and have a look. She peered at the monitor, doing up her blouse.

"You came out pretty well," she said. "I like your glam-rock pout."

"But look at it. That bastard made us into an advert."

"Are we credited?"

"Only our first names."

"Shame. And I look so drunk."

"I suppose you—no, no, no! That's not the point. I mean, don't you feel used?"

"What are you so upset about? You don't look nearly as wasted as me. It's hardly fair. You were downing those shots all night."

"But what about Raj? He never asked us whether we wanted to be on his damn vodka Web site. And all that patter about how smooth it tasted!"

"It *was* smooth."

"But to talk to people and secretly be trying to sell them something—isn't that, I don't know, unethical? Surely you agree that it's completely out of order."

"He didn't ask us to buy anything. He gave us free drinks."

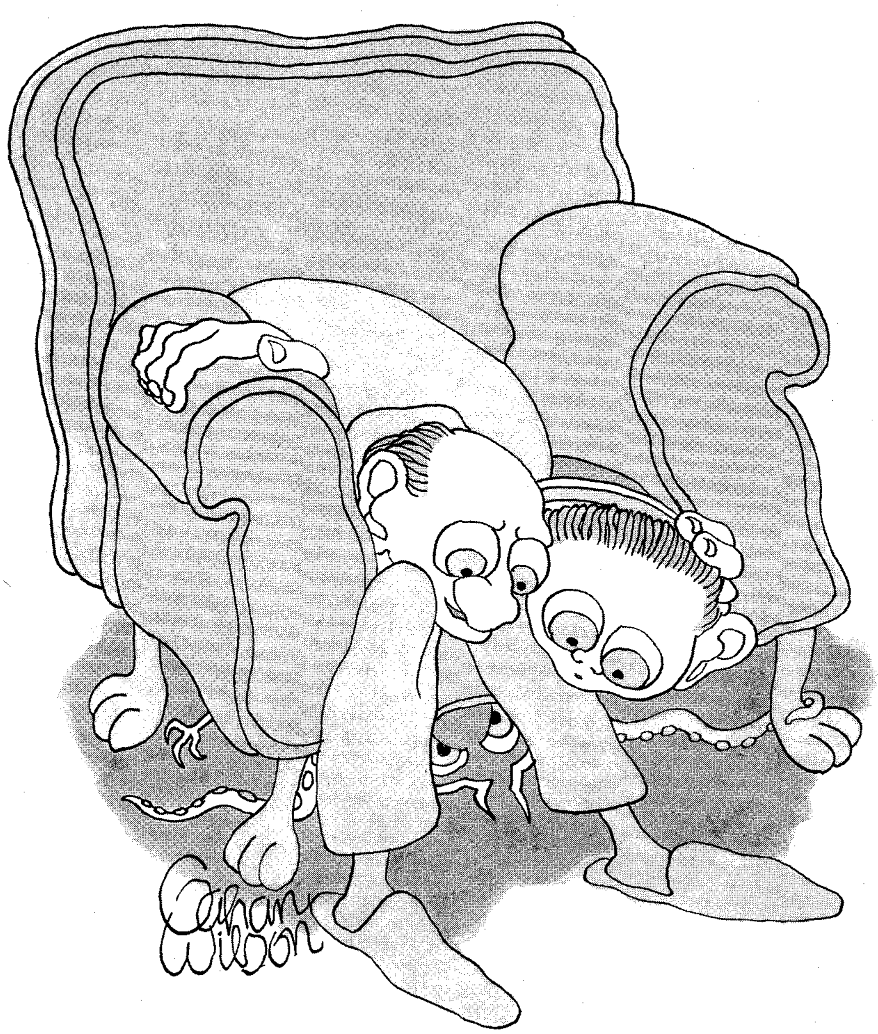
"I know, but the point was to get us to buy something later on. That particular brand. We generate buzz. We recommend it to our friends, it becomes hip, blah-blah-blah."

"He should have given me image approval. Look at my chin! I'm going to have words next time I see him."

"For fuck's sake, Thanh! He was just using us. He wanted to make us into—into early adopters."

"But we *are* early adopters. I got a free phone a few months ago. All I had to do was watch a film and say how it made me feel."

"Jesus, you really are a shallow bitch."



"It's just like that thing you've got under your bed, only this one is for old people."

Thanh and I more or less stopped seeing each other after that. I couldn't understand why she didn't feel more angry. Something precious to me had been violated, something I'd been holding on to. A secret pleasure that I hadn't wanted to throw into the big commercial vat with all the rest of the stuff—all the other moments and memories that get recycled into processed trends, like so many cheese triangles. Sunita's party had been private. That is the only way I can put it. The party had been private and he'd made it public.

I went to tell Sunita. "That's so Raj," she said.

I was confused. What did she mean, "so Raj"? Didn't she think that he'd betrayed her trust? Wasn't his behavior sleazy and underhanded?

"He was just being himself." She laughed. "He's a hustler. That's something you'll learn about Raj when you get to know him better."

One thing I must admit here: I find anger tricky. Anger is a very sincere emotion. We live under the rule of cool, and we are expected to encounter the vicissitudes of the world with a certain degree of irony. Sincerity, as any hipster will tell you, is for awkward teens and people on SSRIs. Think about it—sincerity is gauche, gauche is boring, and boring is rude, so it's only a matter of ordinary politeness not to take things too seriously. But I really couldn't deal with Sunita laughing at me. When you're truly vexed, so vexed that it makes you incoherent and frustrated, there's nothing worse than being laughed at. You cunt, I thought. You fucking cunt. You're not who I thought you were.

Just as I was making up my mind to say something, I was saved by the intercom. Sunita buzzed up fat Constantine, who was hefting a box of mangoes in his meaty hands. He nodded to me, installed himself at the table, and started to peel and slice them. Sunita sat down beside him. I stood by the sink, my fists balled, so consumed with irritation that I couldn't think of anything to say. Constantine fed Sunita slices of mango, spearing them on the tip of his knife. She took them between her teeth, making eyes at him. Eventually, he looked up at me. "Don't let me interrupt," he said.

"He was talking about my friend Raj," Sunita explained, wiping her mouth with a napkin. "He's a bit of a wheeler-dealer."

"My kind of guy," Constantine said.

Sunita smiled at me. "Raj has the greatest car. Have you seen it?"

No, I hadn't.

"It's a big metallic purple thing, with under-floor lighting and 'Rude Mercs' written on the back window. It's hilarious."

"How did you and Raj meet?"

"Oh, around."

That was her standard euphemism for sleeping with someone. There had never been anything serious between Sunita and me, but all the same I felt a pang.

"I can't believe it, Sunny. He's an idiot."

"What's the problem?" Constantine asked. "Who is this Raj?"

"No one," Sunita said. "Just a guy who's been treading on someone's little tootsies."

Constantine gestured to his plate. "Try a mango," he said. "They're Alfonsos. Very sweet."

That night, I couldn't get to sleep. Round and round it went in my mind: Raj, vodka. Of course, it wasn't about the vodka. I'd enjoyed the damn vodka. And surely there was nothing intrinsically wrong with accepting a free drink. But there must come a time when you're allowed to stop being a consumer. There has to be some respite from all that choosing, a time, well, just to *be*. Sunita's party had been cool. Add as many quotation marks around the word as you like, but it was true. Most people never get the chance to attend a party like that. And, yes, there had been an element of performance to it. But I'd thought that we were just being cool for one another, to stave off boredom for a few hours, not to make some poor shell-suited kid on a housing estate feel jealous. I mean, jealousy just breeds resentment, right? Violence. People could get mugged because of Raj and his pictures. People could get raped. I started to look at my life style in a new, fearful light. What did I have that people might want to take? Did people get burgled for their cultural capital?

I'd assumed that Raj's betrayal of trust would be obvious to everyone, but, to my shock, none of my friends seemed to see anything wrong. Otto was a long-haired German who shot music promos. "I need information, man," he said, shrugging. We were sitting in a sushi bar, drinking green tea. "I don't care how it gets to me."

"It's not information," I argued, waving my cup around. "The speed of light, the date of the moon landing. That's information."

SKEET FISHING

FARLEY KATZ

"Uh, they recently invented this thing called the Internet."

"Piss off, Otto. You know what I mean."

"Get over yourself, man. You're acting so old-fashioned, like some kind of Communist. I have the right to perform acts of rational consumer choice: our ancestors fought wars for it. And I think I'm clever enough to filter a little bit of spin, don't you? Look, why don't you check out this band I'm working with?" He handed me a sleek little music player. I listened for a while, out of politeness.

"They're the final wave of New Wave," he explained. "After this, there will never be another reason to wear a Blondie T-shirt."

I nodded listlessly. I felt too despondent to argue anymore. Otto, smiling at me as he bounced his head to the beat of the music he couldn't hear, seemed not to notice. "I knew you'd like them. Aren't those headphones great, though? Optional noise cancellation. Amazing dynamic range. Particularly the bass—really rich, considering how small they are."

A sudden suspicion crossed my mind. But, no, this wasn't some suburban wide-boy. This was Otto.

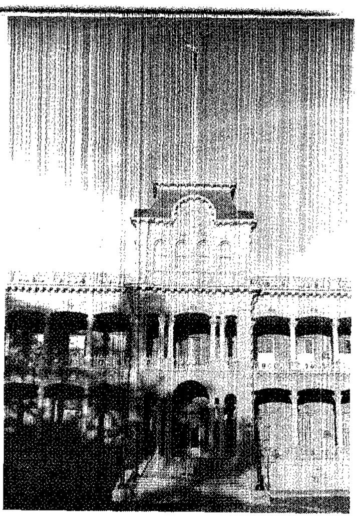
And yet . . . Over the next few days, I started to notice something odd. Every time I met a friend, he or she would immediately make a recommendation, urge me to try something new. Lucas had been to a club on the other side of town and insisted that it was the best night out he'd had in ages. Janine almost forced me to take home a bottle of her "new favorite nutritional supplement." At first, I shrugged it off. But, deep down, I knew that it had something to do with Raj and his vodka. Every night, I'd turn the incident over in my mind. I swallowed Ativan and Valium and Paxil (I had a compliant doctor), hoping that my anxiety would pass. It didn't. There was Joe and his new running shoes. Razia's bike. All my friends seemed to be dropping snippets of advertising copy into their conversation, short messages from their sponsors. They were constantly stating preferences for particular brands, dishing out free samples.

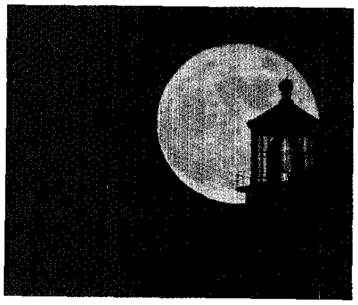
Perhaps nothing had changed. We'd always shared new music with one another or recommended places to eat. But now there was something different. A tone? It was hard to say. I found my-

A TELLER OF TALES

LOPAKA KAPANUI

by John Heckathorn





"There is no place in the Hawaiian Islands that doesn't have a story or a legend," says Lopaka Kapanui. To illustrate his point, Kapanui simply points at the two mountain peaks overlooking the valley of Mānoa. In legend, these peaks are the grandparents of Kahala o Puna, the goddess of the valley, who came to a tragic end. "That soft wind you feel on your cheek," says Kapanui, "that's her father." The valley's characteristic light misty rain—absent on this sunshiny winter day—"that's her mother."

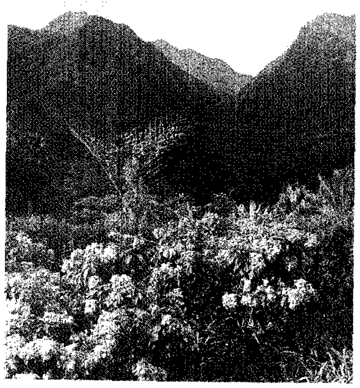
Telling tales about Hawaiian places is what Kapanui does for a living. He runs Honolulu Ghost Tours, which takes groups of both visitors and local residents to places on O'ahu considered haunted. He begins in downtown Honolulu, where ghosts of the old Hawaiian royals and their servants still flicker around 'Iolani Palace. Kapanui's tours often end at the Makapu'u Lookout, at the far eastern end of the Island. "There's a woman ghost there," he says, "who only reveals herself to men who are cheating on their wives or girlfriends." He laughs heartily. "Women enjoy that stop more than men."

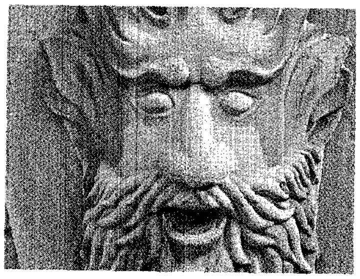
For many, ghost stories are simply a species of entertainment, but Kapanui feels such tales run deeper: they are an intrinsic part of Hawaiian culture. "I take people places and tell them stories, but with integrity and respect for the culture. I want to respect the intelligence of the people I am talking to, as well."

He currently studies Hawaiian religions at the University of Hawai'i, but most of his knowledge he learned from his family, especially his mother, a Hawaiian who grew up on Hawai'i's Big Island. She was, as Kapanui puts it, "a keeper of the culture."

For Hawaiians, most ghosts weren't something to be afraid of, he says. Instead, "they are departed family members who have become protective deities. Your departed uncle might warn you not to go fishing today, if conditions are dangerous." For Hawaiians, he explains, the spiritual was not really otherworldly. "It was part of daily life," he says, adding, "Even though we are living in the modern world, in Hawai'i there's still that connection to what's here spiritually. You can feel that wind—it's real—but it's also Kahala o Puna's father."

Kapanui watches as rainbows arch out of the valley, in clear blue sky. The rainbows seem to end, well, right about where he's sitting. "Those rainbows?" says Kapanui. "Those are Kahala o Puna herself."





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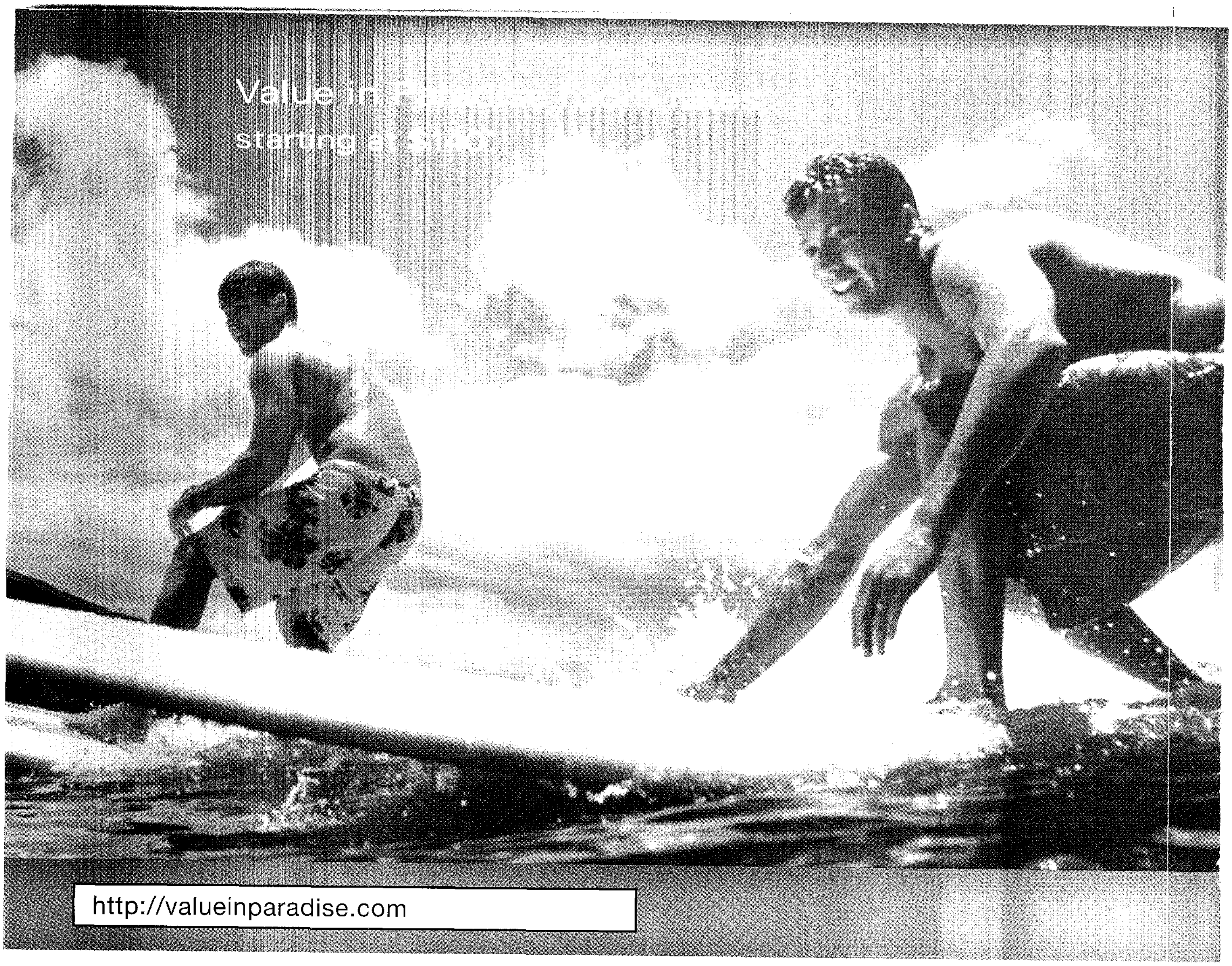

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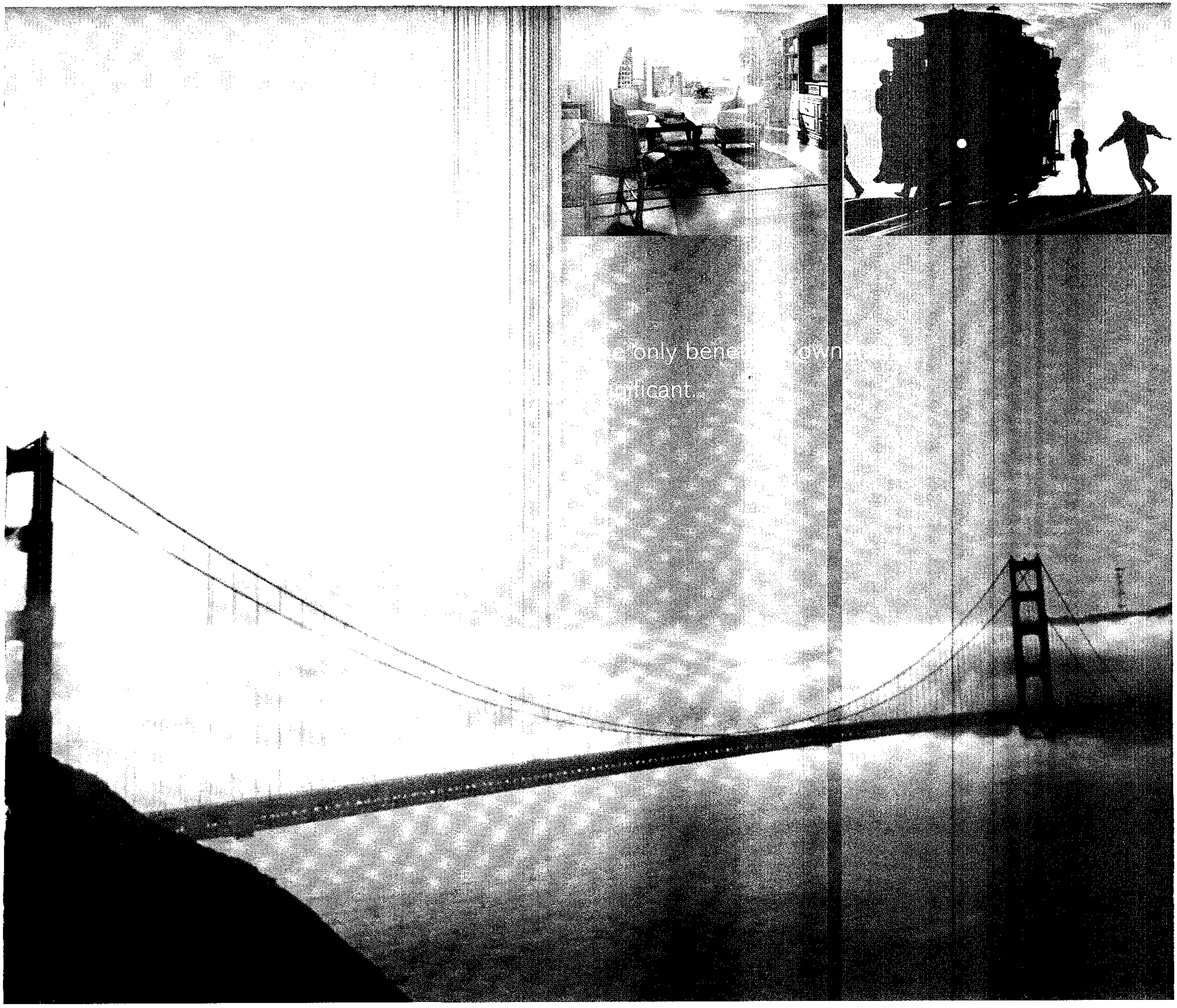

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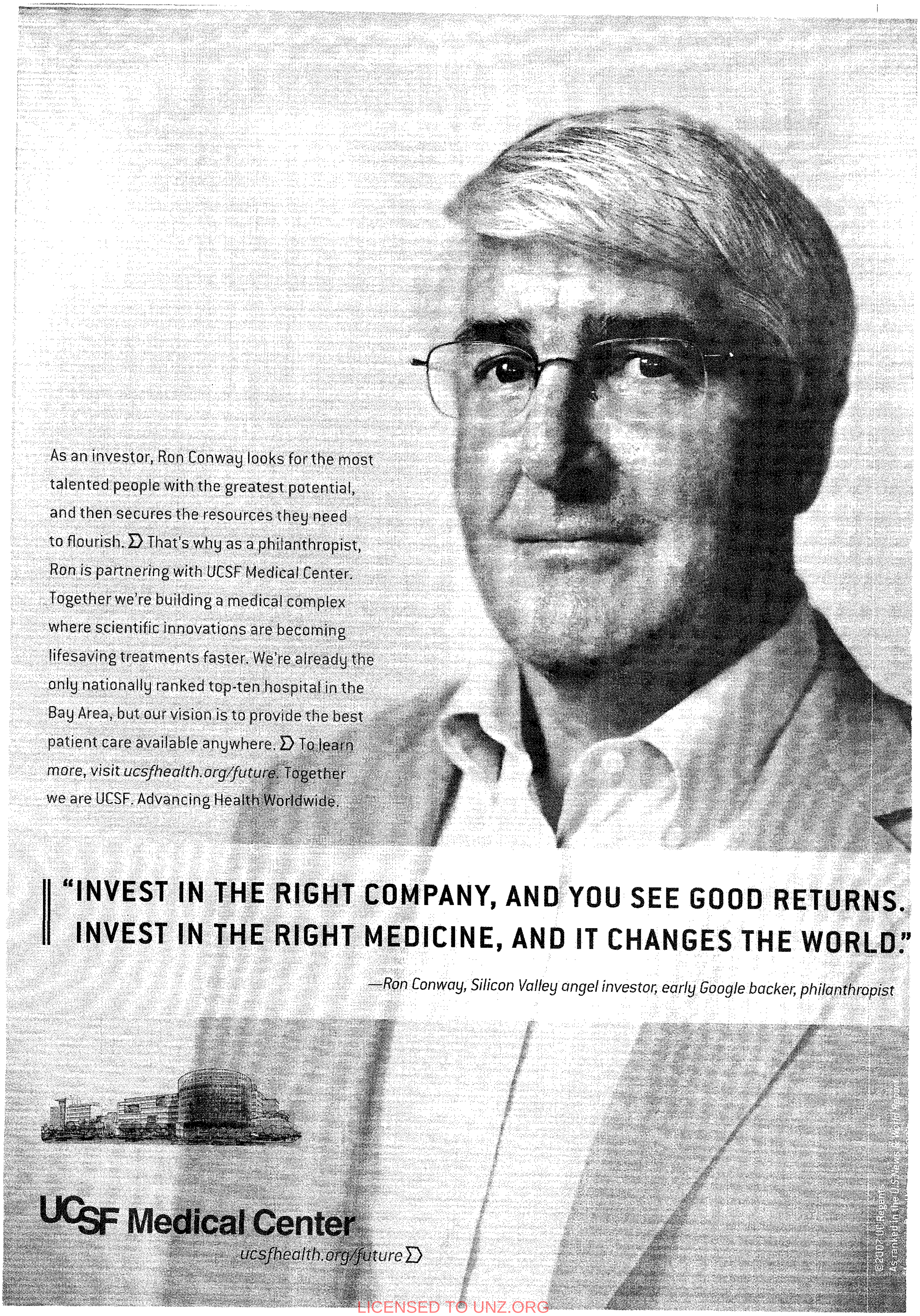

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self wondering if Sasha was telling me that the sushi at Bar Fugu was "to die for" because he meant it or because it was a snappy slogan. Vikram started talking to me at nauseating length about tires. Steel radials, depth of tread. I hadn't even known that Vikram had a car. When Wei Lin began rhapsodizing about the streaming capabilities of his new video projector, I snapped.

"Don't start this shit on me, Wei. I'm sick of it."

"What?"

"This sales patter. I can't take it anymore. Frankly, you disgust me."

"I what?"

"It's not even as if you need the money. You're loaded."

"I don't understand why you're being so hostile."

"Your daddy in Shanghai owns a fucking construction company. We all know, Wei. It's not a secret. So why do you need to do this? There's no reason! Is it fun? Does it get you laid?"

Afterward, he told everyone that I'd physically threatened him. He said to Thanh that he thought I might be on crack.

I was shaken up. I tried to get on with my life, working on my designs, speaking to people—even going out, just as if things were normal. But they weren't. I felt I was under immense mental pressure, in constant danger of some unforeseen catastrophic event, a psychological bridge collapse. I found parties increasingly traumatic: the bombardment of messages, the pitches coming at me from every side. It was impossible to untangle what was being said because the speaker felt or believed it from what was merely repetition. When were people being themselves and when were they acting? I began, ever so slightly, to doubt the reality of other minds. People seemed to zone in and out of existence. Sometimes they were fully present, animated by something original and real. But mostly they were just zombies, empty vessels operated by corporate remote control.

I tell you, I was afraid. Becoming a hermit was looking like a good option. A cave in the Hebrides. The lonely sea and the sky. I was ready to batten down the hatches and crawl into the submarine of my own paranoia when I met Zoe. She understood me immediately, saw that my life had been stripped of all humor, all scope and playfulness, that it was irising down to the enforced sincerity of the locked ward.

Zoe didn't like being in physical proximity to too many people, because she thought it made her sick, though as far as I could tell she was a perfectly healthy person. She didn't go outside much, and always went to the shops with a tub of antiseptic wipes in her bag. On bad days, she wore a face mask. Despite her eccentricities, she was no introvert, was a lively presence on various online sites and game worlds. We spent a lot of time indoors, smoking and talking. She wasn't physically beautiful, but I didn't want someone beautiful; I wanted someone who made me feel safe, which Zoe did—until the night I mentioned her ring.

It was a large copper band with a number of tiny stones set into it, a trashy-looking thing with a vaguely "Lord of the Rings" aesthetic. I asked her what it was.

"This?" she said absent-mindedly, sticking one hand out as she manipulated a joystick with the other, careering through some virtual maze. "It's an appetite-reduction ring. See the tiny gems? There are nine of them. It helps correct biochemical imbalances in the body by reverse-actuating the ionic flow in my bloodstream. You should get one."

Zombie-speech. She had reeled it off without a pause.

"Oh, no, Zoe."

She paused her game. "What?"

"Not you, too."

"I don't understand. Are you all right?"

"Zoe, I'm going to ask you something, and you'd better tell me the truth."

"What are you talking about? You look pale."

"Is someone paying you to say that stuff?"

She giggled. "Sorry, babe, it just pops out sometimes. I didn't mean to pitch you. I'm supposed only to do it to my girlfriends."

"What?"

"Ignore me. You know how hard it is to keep track of one's placements."

"Placements?"

"Placements. Why are you making that face? You're looking at me like I'm some kind of freak."

Einstein
Milton
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"You have a lot of—placements?"

"Oh, don't get on your high horse. You don't work, either. What do you do for cash? If a girl doesn't want a straight job, she has to monetize her social network."

I'm not proud of what I did then. I just couldn't control myself. I slapped her. I told her that she was a fake, a zombie. Before I walked out, I took a last look at her, pathetically scrubbing at her cheek with a cloth.

At my flat, I looked at the presents she'd bought me during our short relationship—a pair of shoes, a scarf. I decided to give them to charity. I found a cardboard box, but it was big and the shoes and scarf didn't take up much space, so I added a few more things. The experience was oddly pleasurable. Once I'd started, it was hard to stop. Soon I'd filled several boxes, then several more. They were too heavy to carry to the charity shop, so I just left them on the street outside my building. For the rest of the day, I watched from the balcony as people stopped to rummage and carry things away. That night, I put the rest of my stuff out. All of it—clothes, books and records, furniture, even the cans of food from my kitchen cupboards. Everything I owned. By the following afternoon, it was all gone.

I spent the next couple of days squatting on my haunches in a corner of my empty flat. Something in me had snapped, was broken beyond repair. My taste had been central to my identity. I'd cultivated it, kept it fed and watered like an exotic flowering plant. Now I realized that what I thought had been an expression of my innermost humanity was nothing but a cloud of life-style signals, available to anyone at the click of a mouse. How had this happened?

I couldn't understand. There had to be something else. What was a personality if it wasn't a drop-down menu, a collection of likes and dislikes? And now that my possessions were gone, what would I put in their place? Who was I without my private pressings, my limited editions, my vintage one-offs? How could I signal to potential allies across the vast black reaches of interpersonal space?

It was then that I realized I'd been robbed. I'd been forcibly expropriated from myself. And who had done this to me? Who was the cause of all my loss and pain? I stormed around to Sunita's to ask for Raj's address. The door was opened by Constantine, wearing a quilted paisley dressing gown.

"She's out," he said, tightening the cord around his paunch. "She says don't come around no more." He burped.

"Sunita doesn't want to see me?"

"That's right. She says you have a bad energy."

I didn't know quite how to process that information. "Whatever. For now, I just need a number for Raj."

"Raj is it? He's a nice guy."

"So you know him?"

"Sure. Everyone knows Raj."

"So how do I get hold of him?"

"I've got his card somewhere."

He disappeared and came back holding a business card. On it was written, in a cheesy futuristic font, "Raj, Bohemian." I couldn't tell if it was a company name or a job description. The office address was close by.

"Thanks."

Constantine looked at me solicitously. "You know your problem?"

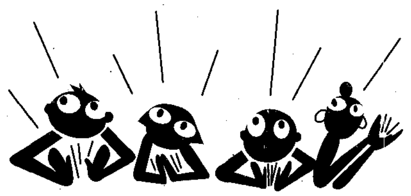
"Tell me my problem."

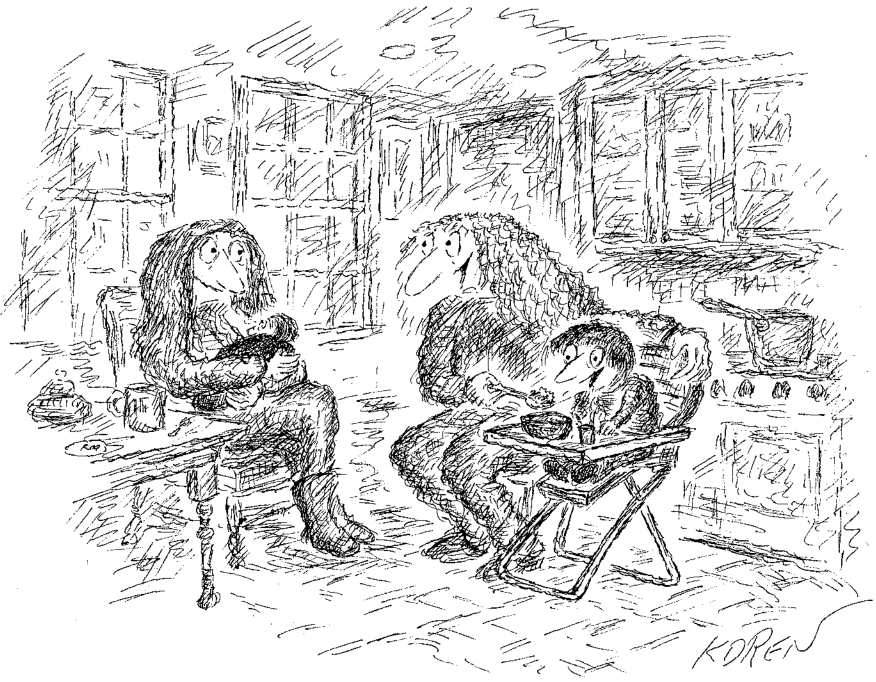
"Stress. You should get a massage. I'll give you another number. It's local. The girls are very attentive."

I turned my back on him and pressed the call button on the lift.

The trip to Raj's office passed in a dream. I was a ghost, floating through a world of moving signage, people carrying shopping bags, immigrants handing out flyers for bars and language schools. I went into a department store, dazzled by chrome and glass and brushed steel. It was a palace of mirrors, zombie heaven. Girls at the makeup counter, dressed like slutty pharmacists. Rich men with ski tans fingering cashmere sweaters. In the housewares department was a display cabinet of knives, gleaming with surgical allure. I bought the largest and headed back up the escalator to the teeming street.

Raj's office wasn't what I'd expected. I was imagining—I don't know what I was imagining. A flashy loft. A life-style statement. It turned out to be a shared





"I'm not his mom anymore—now I'm his life coach."

• •

suite, a dreary place with grubby tube lights and contract carpeting, where freelancers rented desks, huddling together to make themselves feel less alone. One or two people looked up from their work as I walked in. I felt dizzy, disoriented, carrying the knife wrapped in a yellow plastic bag.

"Hey, man! Good to see you!"

Raj was standing up behind a desk piled high with paper and promotional knickknacks. Across the top of his computer monitor paraded a little line of toys. He looked tired and drab, his eyes rimmed with dark circles, a reddish stain disfiguring his crisp white polo shirt. Raj, my nemesis. So ordinary. I had gone there to kill him, to make him into nothing for having made me into nothing. But now that he stood in front of me he was just a guy with a greasy forehead and a pimple on his top lip. Now that I saw the reality of his life, the plastic bags full of free samples, the half-eaten sandwich balanced on a teetering stack of magazines, I knew that any confrontation would be absurd. I sank down onto a swivel chair and spun in little half circles, while he hovered over me, this person who'd polluted my whole life without even realizing it. Someone else was there. A woman. I think he was trying to introduce her to me. I shook my head mutely. What was I? A sorting device. A filter. A human bivalve, culture accreting in me like a mercury deposit. I looked around the office at the young workers wearing headphones, typing, talking into phones with their feet on their desks. This was the world, just the same indoors and out, a place of total nullity. How could anything make any difference? Unless you managed to keep your head underwater, to immerse yourself in the endless metonymic shuffling of objects, it would be intolerable.

"You look awful," Raj said. "Are you feeling O.K.?"

I stared up at him. He was holding out a glass of water.

"Is it good?" I asked.

He shook his head, not understanding.

"Is it better than other brands of water?"

"It's just water. From the tap."

I took a sip.

"Are you sick?" he asked gently.

"No."

"What is it, then?"

I closed my eyes. "I'm not sure. I think I might be bored."

"Ah."

"Is there anything going on tonight?"

He smiled and started to tell me about a party, a guest list, a secret venue. I took out my phone to punch in the contact number. ♦

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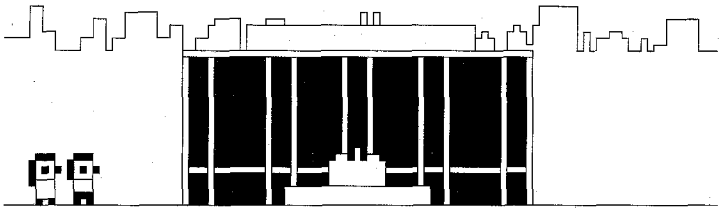
THE CRITICS



A CRITIC AT LARGE

ADVANCED PLACEMENT

The wicked joy of the "Gossip Girl" novels.

BY JANET MALCOLM

As Lolita and Humbert drive past a horrible accident, which has left a shoe lying in the ditch beside a blood-spattered car, the nymphet remarks, "That was the exact type of moccasin I was trying to describe to that jerk in the store." This is the exact type of black comedy that Cecily von Ziegesar, the author of the best-selling "Gossip Girl" novels for teen-age girls, excels in. Von Ziegesar writes in the language of contemporary youth—things are cool or hot or they so totally suck. But the language is a decoy. The heartlessness of youth is von Ziegesar's double-edged theme, the object of her mockery—and sympathy. She understands that children are a pleasure-seeking species, and that adolescence is a delicious last gasp (the light is most golden just before the shadows fall) of rightful selfishness and cluelessness. She also knows—as the authors of the best children's books have known—that children like to read what they don't entirely understand. Von Ziegesar pulls off the tour de force of wickedly satirizing the young while amusing them. Her designated reader is an adolescent girl, but the reader she seems to have firmly in mind as she writes is a literate, even literary, adult.

As the first book opens, Blair Waldorf—who is almost seventeen and lives in a penthouse at Fifth Avenue and Seventy-second Street, with her divorcée mother, Eleanor, her younger brother, Tyler, and her cat, Kitty Minky—is sulking in her room. Blair, in the description of a classmate, is "the bitchiest, vainest girl in the entire senior class, or maybe the entire world," and an antiheroine of the first rank: bad-tempered, mean-spirited, bulimic, acquisitive, endlessly scheming, and, of course, dark-haired. The blond heroine, Serena van der Woodsen (who lives at an even better Fifth Avenue address, right across from the Metropolitan Museum), is incandescently beautiful, exceptionally kind, and, in the end, it has to be said, somewhat boring. The series belongs to awful Blair, who inspires von Ziegesar's highest flights of comic fancy.

Blair is sulking because her mother's new boyfriend, a Jewish real-estate developer named Cyrus Rose, "a completely annoying, fat loser," and her mother are in the kitchen eating breakfast in matching red silk robes. When dressed, Rose "looked like someone who might help you pick out shoes at Saks—bald, except for a small, bushy mustache, his fat stomach barely hidden in a shiny blue double-breasted suit. He jingled the change in his pocket incessantly. . . . He had a loud laugh." *What*? We're only on page 6 and already reading about a fat, vulgar Jew! Doesn't von Ziegesar know that anti-Semitic stereotypes are no longer tolerated in children's literature? Of course she does. Cyrus Rose is only one among many tokens of her gleeful political incorrectness. An elderly guest speaker at Blair's high-school graduation is another:

> "Auntie Lynn," some old lady who'd basically founded the Girl Scouts or something, was supposed to talk. Auntie Lynn was already leaning on her metal walker in the front row, wearing a poo-brown pantsuit and hearing aids in both ears, looking sleepy and bored. After she spoke—or keeled over and died, whichever came first—Mrs. McLean would hand out the diplomas.

Only someone very hard-hearted wouldn't laugh at this. The way von Ziegesar implicates us in her empathic examination of youth's callousness is the Waughish achievement of these strange, complicated books. And in Blair she has found a powerful pivot for her feat.

She has equipped this girl with an excess of the most unattractive but also perhaps most necessary impulses of human nature—the impulses that give us such up and go as we have. Unlike her forerunners Becky Sharp and Lizzie Eustace, who ruthlessly elbowed their way into wealthy aristocratic society, Blair already has all the money and position anyone could want. She is pure naked striving, restlessly seeking an object, any object, and never knowing when enough is enough. However—and, again, unlike her prototypes—Blair never harms anyone but herself. She thinks malevolent thoughts about everyone, but she does not act on them. It is her own foot that she invariably shoots. Her goals of the moment—to lose her virginity to her boyfriend, Nate Archibald, and to get into Yale University—elude her. Something always gets in the way of her doing it with Nate, and her Yale interview is a catastrophe beyond imagination.

Nate is a kind of Vronsky manqué, with a grande-dame mother, like Vronsky's, and a Navy-captain father who is "a master sailor and extremely handsome, but a little lacking in the hugs department." (Too bad Tolstoy didn't think of a father like that for V.) Nate "might look like a stud, but he was actually pretty weak." This is because he is stoned most of the time. He lives in a town house in the East Eighties and is a senior at St. Jude's, a private school that appears to be modelled on the Collegiate School, as Blair and Serena's school, Constance Billard, is modelled on von Ziegesar's old school, Nightingale-Bamford.

Unlike the actual private schools of New York, however, which give a fair number of scholarships to low-income minority students, von Ziegesar's private schools are almost a hundred per cent minority-free. (I say almost because of Carmen Fortier, a scholarship girl from the Bronx, who appears—chewing gum—on page 86 of the first book of the series, and is never seen again.) Of course, this glaring absence is necessary to von Ziegesar's program of provocation. She does not compromise it. There are no Brussels sprouts hidden in her Rice Krispie marshmallow treats. She is

ABOVE: TIBOR KÁRPÁTI; OPPOSITE: QUICKHONEY

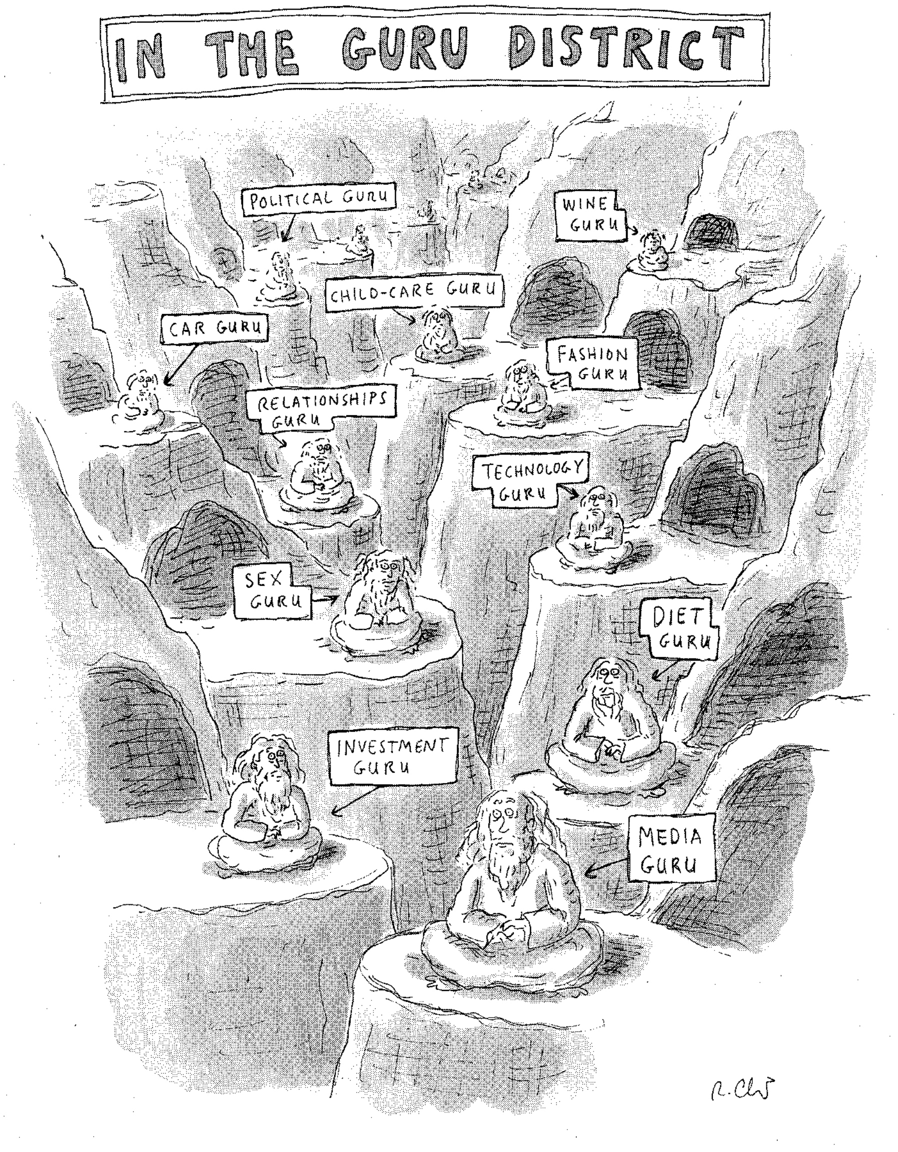
The heartlessness of youth is Cecily von Ziegesar's double-edged theme, the object of her mockery—and sympathy.

writing a transgressive fairy tale, not a worthy book for a school list. "Welcome to New York's Upper East Side, where my friends and I live and go to school and play and sleep—sometimes with each other" is von Ziegesar's opening volley, delivered in the voice of an anonymous figure called Gossip Girl, who continues:

> We all live in huge apartments with our own bedrooms and bathrooms and phone lines. We have unlimited access to money and booze and whatever else we want, and our parents are rarely home, so we have tons of privacy. We're smart, we've inherited classic good looks, we wear fantastic clothes, and we know how to party.

Von Ziegesar understands that the princes and princesses of fairy tales require the foil of beggars and commoners, and so, of her six main characters, only three—Blair, Serena, and Nate—belong to the world of the disgustingly rich. Of the others, two live on the wrong side of the Park, and one lives in Williamsburg. Dan and Jenny Humphrey share a decaying West End Avenue apartment with their father, Rufus, "the infamous retired editor of lesser-known beat poets," whatever that means, who goes around the house in his underwear and a three-day-old gray beard and cooks inedible tagines from Paul Bowles recipes. But he lacks nothing in the hugs department and, indeed, turns out to be the only attentive parent in the series. (He is also a single parent—his wife ran off to the Czech Republic "with some balding, horny count" a few years earlier.) He "hated the Upper East Side and all its pretensions," but he sends Jenny to Constance Billard and Dan to a private school called Riverside Prep because "the way he saw it, you had two choices in this city":

> Either you spent an arm and a leg to send your kids to private school, where they learned to shop for insanely expensive clothes and to be snobbish to their father, but also to converse in Latin, memorize Keats, and do algorithms in their heads; or, you sent them to public school, where they might not learn to read, might not graduate, and risked getting shot.



The question of where Rufus gets the money for the private-school fees—and for the designer clothes that Dan and Jenny buy on his credit card as their lives intersect with those of the East Side kids—is left unanswered. Von Ziegesar has other concerns than writing books that make a lot of sense. Along with the pieties of political correctness, she has taken on the indecencies of consumer culture. Insanely expensive clothes are the engine of her sendup of our time of ceaseless shopping. There is scarcely a page on which the name of a fashion designer doesn't appear. The kids don't wear dresses and coats and pants and shoes; they wear Diane von Furstenberg dresses, Stephane Kélian shoes, Hugo Boss coats, Marc Jacobs shirts. If the book has any redeeming social value, it is as an education in label recognition. After reading the "Gossip Girl" books, you will never walk into a department store again without feeling a little surge of pride as you recognize Christian Louboutin and John Fluevog and Michael Kors—who are to their world what Marcel Proust and Henry James and Theodore Dreiser are to the bookish audience for whom von Ziegesar writes in the guise of writing for the pre-S.A.T. young. The books are full of literary allusions: there are quotes from Wilde, Hemingway, Shakespeare, references to Goethe and Tolstoy, and chapters entitled "The Red or the Black" and "What We Talk About When We're Not Talking About Love."

Dan Humphrey is a caricature of the angst-ridden nerd who writes poetry. Dan's friend Vanessa Abrams is so taken with a poem of his, called "Sluts," that, behind his back, she sends it to this magazine, where it is immediately accepted by our revered (if imaginary) Submissions Editor, Jani Price. After the poem is published, Dan, who previously spent his after-school time in his room "reading morbid, existentialist poetry about the bitter fate of being human," becomes a star. He is courted by an agent. A rock band hires him to write lyrics. He starts shopping at Agnès B.

His sister, Jenny, is a shy ninth grader, who "preferred to be invisible" and might have succeeded "if her boobs weren't so incredibly huge." She is a kind of stand-in for the eighth and ninth graders who read the "Gossip Girl" books, and who will identify with her innocent worship of the cool senior girls. But, except for her boobs, she is not very interesting.

Vanessa is "an anomaly at Constance, the only girl in the school who had a nearly shaved head, wore black turtlenecks every day, read Tolstoy's 'War and Peace' over and over like it was the Bible [and] had no friends at all at Constance." Her hippie parents, Arlo and Gabriela, who live in Vermont in a house made of recycled automobile tires, have allowed Vanessa to live in Williamsburg with her older sister Ruby, who plays bass in a rock band, on the condition that she get "a good, safe, high-school education." Writing of a visit the hippie parents make to New York, von Ziegesar fulfills her pact with youth to lose no opportunity to express the disgust it feels for the old and unbeautiful and deviant. She dresses the "gaunt and alarmed" Arlo in a Peruvian poncho and ankle-length hemp skirt ("Yes, that's right, a skirt") and the gray-braided Gabriela in a garish African schmatte, and sends them off to an exclusive New York benefit. When Vanessa asks where the benefit is being held, Gabriela replies, "Somewhere called the Frick. It's on Fifth Street, I think. . . . I've got the address written down somewhere." Weightless little in-jokes like this are scattered throughout the books, like the optional confectioner's sugar on tea cake. Von Ziegesar's hands are never idle.

Of course, the cake itself is of Hostess Twinkie immateriality—the "Gossip Girl" books are the lightest of light reading. They revolve around the twin desires of von Ziegesar's high-school seniors: to have a good time and to get into college. The conflict that might exist between these desires in the real world does not exist in the world of "The Gossip Girls." No one ever cracks a book (they are too busy shopping at the three "B"s—Bendel's, Bergdorf's, and Barneys—or working in soup kitchens so that they can say they did on their college applications), and (with one exception, a vicious boy named Chuck Bass, who "could barely spell, had never read a book in its entirety, and thought Beowulf was a type of fur used for lining coats") everyone gets into college. This is not much of a plot, admittedly, but von Ziegesar's impudence invests the dopey activities of her characters with true page-turning interest.

Von Ziegesar uses the technique of narration through interior voice with all her major characters, but when she gets into the id-shaped mind of Blair Waldorf she crosses a kind of boundary. Blair is both a broader caricature and a more real person than the others. Her over-the-top selfishness and hatefulness has the ring of behind-our-masks-we're-all-like-that truth. And among her malevolent internal mutterings lurk some of the series' funniest lines. When her mother marries Cyrus Rose, for example, and proposes that Blair reconsider her refusal to take his name, Blair's inner voice growls back: "*Blair Rose*? No thank you. It sounded like the name of a perfume made especially for Kmart." Her refusal is a rare gesture of defiance. In almost every other respect, she is an obedient, even rather docile, child. She is angered and embarrassed by her mother's marriage to the oily Cyrus (and by her pregnancy at forty-seven), but she confines her fury to her thoughts. She is always perfectly civil to Cyrus, who is a perfectly amiable goof. Nor does she kick and scream when her pretty bedroom is requisitioned as a nursery for the baby and she has to move into her stepbrother Aaron's ugly, ecologically correct room (it has a cruelty-free mahogany dresser), which smells so strongly of his dog, Mooky, that Kitty Minky urinates all over the bed in protest. She merely packs a bag and moves into a suite at the Plaza. Has the powerlessness of children and the power of money ever been so nicely fused? The gesture also gives rise to one of the series' best set pieces.

Ensconced at the Plaza, Blair calls Nate and tells him to "get your ass over here right now." Nate agrees, but, because he is with friends getting stoned, he quickly forgets about the call. Blair waits and waits. She calls Nate and gets no reply. (He has wandered off to the Battery to sail his father's boat to Bermuda and left his cell phone behind.) Blair is wearing black silk La Perla underwear and has ordered champagne and caviar on toast points. She eats a toast point, then another, and calls her father, Harold Waldorf, in the South of France, "where he'd been living since he and Eleanor split up over his gayness almost two years ago." It is late at night in France, and "Blair could picture him perfectly, naked except for a pair of royal blue silk boxer shorts, his sleeping lover—François or Eduard or whatever his name was—snoring softly beside him."

" 'Bear? Is everything okay? Did you hear from those fuckheads at Yale yet? Are you in?' her father demanded as soon as he heard her voice."

Blair reflects that "talking to her dad was exactly like talking to one of her girlfriends." As she finishes the toast points and begins drinking the champagne, Harold inanely tells her, "You deserve to have it all." She is moved to ask, "If I deserve to have it all, then how come stupid Yale hasn't let me in yet?"

" 'Oh, Bear,' her dad sighed in his manly-but-motherly voice that made both men *and* women fall in love with him instantly. 'They will, dammit. They *will* let you in.' "

I will not give away whether Blair does or doesn't get into Yale. I would like to go on telling Blair stories until they are gone, like the toast points. The platter has barely been touched. But I think I have given enough of an idea of what she and her creator are about. The television series based on the "Gossip Girl" books was reviewed here by Nancy Franklin (November 26, 2007). I completely share Nancy's (or should I say Nanci's?) dim view of the adaptation. It is related to the original only in the names and outlines of the characters. " 'I don't know what I'd do without Barneys.' Serena sighed, as if the store had saved her life." Without von Ziegesar's fast, mocking commentary to propel them, the TV episodes are sluggish and crass—a move from Barneys to Kmart.

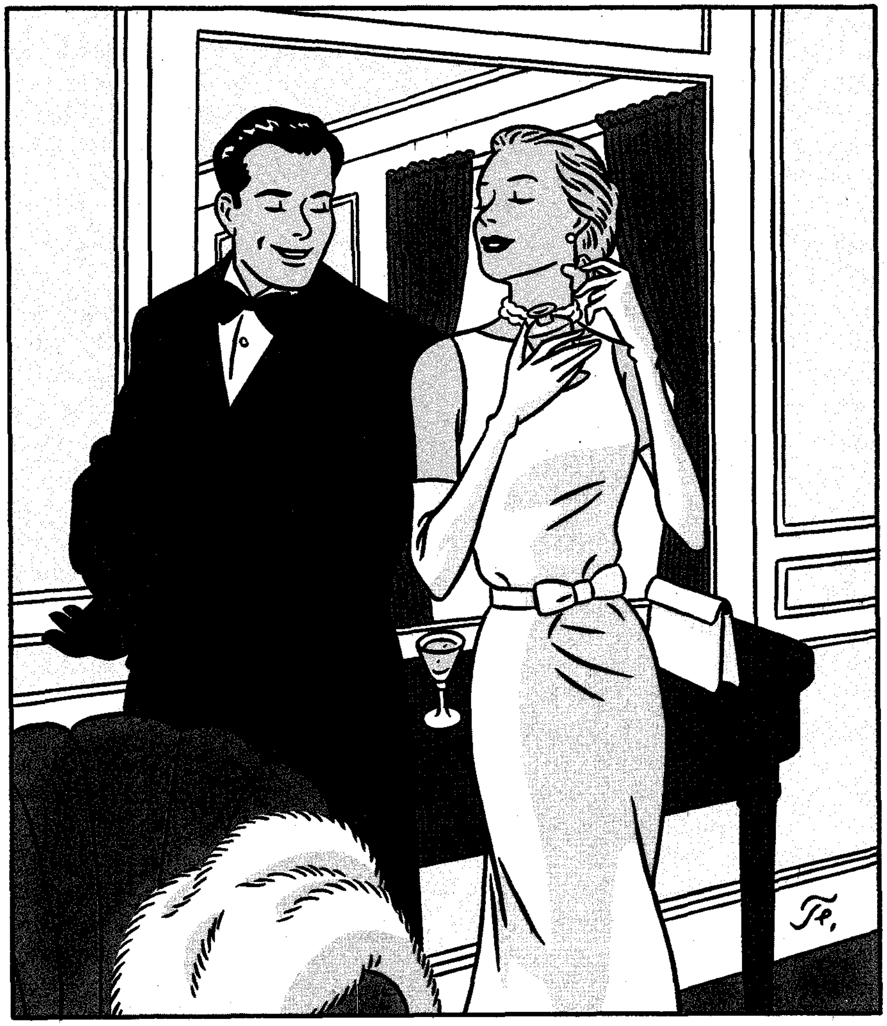
Among the many errors that the TV series makes, perhaps the most glaring is its promotion of the books' parents from their status as emblems of parental inadequacy to that of characters in their own right. In the TV version, we are asked to follow the stories of the parents in tandem with the stories of their children: Lillian van der Woodsen and Rufus Humphrey, for one particularly unfortunate example, are thrust into a trite romance. What makes classic children's literature so appealing (to all ages) is its undeviating loyalty to the world of the child. In the best children's books, parents never share the limelight with their children; if they are not killed off on page 1, they are cast in the pitifully minor roles that actual parents play in their children's imaginative lives. That von Ziegesar's parent characters are ridiculous as well as insignificant in the eyes of their children only adds to the sly truthfulness of her comic fairy tale. ♦

BOOKS

SCENTS AND SENSIBILITY

What the nose knows.

BY JOHN LANCHESTER



Behind the perfumer's palette is the history of synthetic organic chemistry.

FLOCH

For years, ever since I started taking an interest in wine, I've been annoyed by the word "grainy." It's a word that mavens use in relation to red wines, and refers to certain types of tannin—the chemical that cures leather, is present in tea, and makes the mouth pucker. Tannin is a preservative and an important factor in the way wines age. Still, how could a liquid be "grainy"?

Then, a few nights ago, I opened a bottle of wine I'd been given, a Languedoc red called Le Pigeonnier, from the European heat-wave year of 2003, and, without concentrating very hard, took a sip, noticed something odd about the mouthfeel of the wine, and suddenly realized—*bam!*—that it was grainy. I'd found the famous grainy tannins, and the term actually made sense, because the wine definitely had a particulate, almost sandlike texture, not unpleasant, but distinctive. What's more, in tasting it I realized that I'd encountered versions of it—milder, more restrained versions—before. Now I knew what grainy tannins were.

Most taste experiences work like that. A taste or a smell can pass you by, unremarked or nearly so, in large part because you don't have a word for it; then you see the thing and grasp the meaning of a word at the same time, and both your palate and your vocabulary have expanded. One day, you catch the smell of gooseberries from a Sauvignon Blanc, or red currants from a Cabernet, or bubble gum from a Gamay, or horse manure from a Shiraz, and from that point on you know exactly what people mean when they say they detect these things. The smell of a "corked" bottle of wine, for instance, is something that, once it has been pointed out to you, you never forget.

The idea that your palate and your vocabulary expand simultaneously might sound felicitous, but there is a catch. The words and the references are really useful only to people who have had the same experiences and use the same vocabulary: those references are to a shared basis of sensory experience and a shared language. To people who haven't had those shared experiences, this way of talking can seem like horse manure, and not in a good way.

Consider product A, in which

> layers of cedar and raspberry strike a sharp upfront note, while clove and creamy notes add body while contributing an exotic, sumptuous character that conveys luxury in its essence. Might there also be a trace of rubber, though?

And then there's B, with

> its aroma of underripe bananas, and the way the fruitiness opens up on my tongue with a flick of bitterness that quickly fades to reveal lush, grassy tones.

Product C, on the other hand, is

> fruity (with a high-profile role for the deliciously garbagey, overripe smell of guava) plus floral (powdery rosy) plus green (neroli and oakmoss).

These are descriptions of, respectively, a chocolate, an olive oil, and a perfume, but you couldn't possibly guess that. I've never caught traces of red fruit in a dark chocolate, I don't even know what neroli is, and, as for underripe bananas in olive oil, I'm more likely to catch the Sundance Kid in Bolivia. That doesn't mean that the people who can taste these things are bluffing; rather, they have a vocabulary of specific sense references that I haven't acquired. (To complicate matters, sometimes these people actually are bluffing.) There is a loss involved in learning about taste: as you gain a more detailed and precise vocabulary, you risk talking to fewer and fewer people—the people who know what these taste references mean. As your vocabulary becomes more specific, more useful, it also becomes less inclusive.

For that reason, imaginative writers tend to flee as far as possible from the too-specific nomenclatures of the expert and toward pure evocations of sensation. It is possible to feel envious of people who wrote about wine before the tyranny of expert descriptors. The classic text in this respect is the scene in "Brideshead Revisited" where the narrator, Charles Ryder, and his friend Sebastian Flyte make a serious run on the bottles in the latter's ancestral cellar, getting comprehensively blitzed and making tasting notes:

> "It is a little, shy wine like a gazelle."
> "Like a leprechaun."
> "Dappled, in a tapestry meadow."
> "Like a flute by still water."
> ". . . And this is a wise old wine."
> "A prophet in a cave."
> ". . . And this is a necklace of pearls on a white neck."
> "Like a swan."
> "Like the last unicorn."

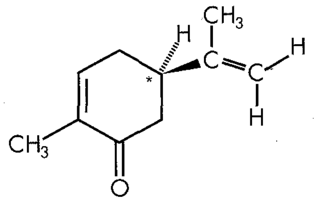
Here the unlikeliness is part of the fun. Paradoxically, the more deliberately over-the-top taste descriptions are, the more they can appeal to a general, untrained reader. Prose that is rich in similes and wild comparisons is making an effort to reach out. This is the sort of game that anyone can play—a wine can remind you of your first kiss, or of the smell of a new car, even if you don't know the difference between volatile phenolics and malolactic conversion.

In a seminal study of the subject, "Wines: Their Sensory Evaluation" (1976), Maynard A. Amerine and Edward B. Roessler called this the "Romantic" tradition in wine writing. They were against it. Both men were professors at the University of California at Davis, an important center for the study of wine, and they wanted to put some scientific backbone into the business of tasting—or, as they preferred to call it, "sensory evaluation," since all the senses were involved. (One of their senses is pain: "It is rare for a wine to be so acid as to give genuine pain. . . .") They sought to bring methodological rigor to what might have seemed an inherently subjective enterprise ("In a paired-sample preference test with 64 trials, how many agreeing judgments are required for significance at the 5% level?"), and the underlying plea for a rational scoring system to evaluate wines, combined with a pragmatic, debunking attitude toward fancy wine vocabulary, had a big effect. The two men had no use for taste words such as "flinty"—"We confess that this flavor (odor?) has never come our way"—or "musty": "Avoid it unless you know what it means. We don't." What they believed in was tasting wines and evaluating them according to verifiable, quantifiable criteria.

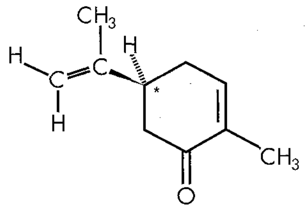
Point systems have been popular ever since. Part of their appeal is the way they create a bridge between the technical process of assessment and something the ordinary consumer can actually use. The most influential wine assessments in the world are those scores, out of a hundred, which appear in Robert Parker's *The Wine Advocate*, followed by similar systems in such magazines as *Wine Spectator*. A system advocated by Amerine and Roessler had the now touching austerity of the nineteen-seventies, offering, instead, to give marks out of only twenty, but the basic idea is the same: break a wine down into color, appearance, odor, body, and so on, assign it marks in each category, and voilà!—you have a single number that sums up the wine. The reader doesn't need a fancy vocabulary of taste; he just needs to know the score.

Point systems aren't the only thing that this more scientific approach brings to the study of taste. It doesn't take long to discover that most of what we think of as taste is, in fact, smell. The tongue can detect only five tastes, salty, sweet, bitter, sour, and a taste whose receptors have only begun to be identified: umami—the savory, brothy sensation that is amply present in Parmesan, seaweed, and ripe tomatoes. All other taste sensations are really smells, as a very simple experiment will confirm: all you have to do to prove it is hold your nose while you taste something.

So taste is mainly smell, and smell is a profound mystery. Why is it that one molecule



smells of spearmint, while its mirror image



smells of caraway? No one knows. When scientists create new molecules in the laboratory, they may know every detail of a molecule's structure yet have no clue about what it will smell like. In 1991, scientists discovered the family of genes responsible for the nose's roughly three hundred and fifty olfactory receptors; these, in combination, are what detect the presence of molecules and allow the brain to translate them into sensory experiences—so H_2S, hydrogen sulfide, hits the receptors and our brain tells us that we are in the presence of rotten eggs.

A trained nose can become very, very good at isolating these sensory experiences and matching them with the relevant molecules. Theoretically, every known odorant molecule could have an agreed descriptor. The descriptor wouldn't need to be in words: it could be a number, so that the wintergreen scent of methyl salicylate would be 172, say, and the garlicky odor of allicin would be 402. That would be the beginnings of a fully scientific language of taste—a joyless, inhuman prospect.

The language of taste has, therefore, reached something of an impasse. On the one hand, we have the Romantic route, in which you are free to compare a taste to the last unicorn or the sensation you had when you were told that you failed your driving test—and others are free to have no idea what you are talking about. On the other, we have the scientific route, which comes down to numbers, and risks missing the fundamental truth of all smells and tastes, which is that they are, by definition, *experiences*. One of the things that are so welcome about "Perfumes:

The Guide" (Viking; $27.95), by Luca Turin and Tania Sanchez, is that, while the authors embrace point systems (they offer between one and five stars) and science, they also offer vivid, funny, evocative descriptions of the smells they write about. Here, for instance, is Turin's discussion of Antidote, by Viktor and Rolf:

> There is a new chemical beast prowling the streets, a strange molecule with the feel of a light, volatile top note and the power and tenacity of the most powerful drydown materials. Smelling it at length gives the feeling of alarm one would get from trying to pick up a two-year-old child and finding that it weighed as much as a car. This strange creature is called sclarene, an intermediate in the synthesis of Ambrox from clary sage, and has a fresh-herbaceous dry smell that simply goes on forever.

Turin and Sanchez don't fear the science of their subject; far from it. Turin is a professional biophysicist and a principal in a company that develops new-smelling molecules; Sanchez is that happy thing, a perfume critic. To enjoy "Perfumes," you don't need to know, or even to like, perfumes, such is the brio of Turin's and Sanchez's prose. Their book has a series of introductory chapters about scent in general, and reviews of more than twelve hundred perfumes, initialled by T.S. or L.T.

To understand perfume, science is a good place to start, since it's with the nineteenth-century discovery of synthetic fragrances that modern perfumes began. Synthetics are molecules that are made in the laboratory, and they are crucial to perfumery: they supply fragrances that can't be created through natural processes. Take the smell of a rose, for example. It is instantly recognizable in nature, but it can't be chemically extracted from the flower. (It's possible to extract rose oil, but rose oil doesn't quite smell like a rose.) To create the fragrance of a rose, you must synthesize it from other molecules; the route to the illusion of nature travels straight through the lab. Synthetics can also be "abstract," in that they don't smell like anything else at all—they aren't surrogates for natural smells. In an earlier book, "The Secret of Scent," Turin cites Coca-Cola as a brilliant example of an abstract taste, one that resembles nothing in nature.

The history of perfumery is, in large part, the history of synthetics. The first important family was the fougères. These came into use in the early eighteen-eighties and, as the word suggests, are said to be fernlike—which is one of those scent referents that I simply don't get. Let's just say that cheap and cheerful versions of fougère are present in Blue Stratos and the great smell of Brut. Soon vanillin, which was synthesized from pinewood sap, became a crucial ingredient in perfume (it's a dominant note in Guerlain's Jicky), and then, in 1888, a chemist accidentally invented synthetic musks while fooling around with TNT. (Turin describes the role of musks in perfume as "something akin to the transparent varnish on a painting that gives all colors depth and saturation.") Natural musk comes from the glands of certain deer that live in the Himalayas, so the laboratory version had the significant advantage of being much cheaper. The typical cost of synthetics is fifty dollars a kilogram; naturals can be hundreds of times as much.

In subsequent decades, as the inventions continued, the perfumer's palette of scents steadily increased. Turin writes, "The enormous artistic edge that chemistry gives perfumers is the ability, familiar to the gods of Olympus and to fairy godmothers when putting together a titanically gifted baby, to compose a personage from disparate inherited virtues: the rosy, grassy freshness of lily of the valley, the rasp of lily proper, the mushroom note of gardenia, the lemon of magnolia, the banana of ylang ylang, the deep woody velvet of violets, the boozy sweetness of rose, the soapy edge of cyclamen, etc. Marshalling all these molecular genes into producing something viable, even beautiful, is far from easy." It is as if the history of painting had proceeded via the invention of new colors. There are fashions in smell, too, and the heavy-duty perfumes of the nineteen-eighties, in particular, come in for a hard time from Turin and Sanchez. They give some of these perfumes a rating of five out of five, while at the same time more or less begging the reader not to buy them. Opium is "unquestionably one of the greatest fragrances of all time," Turin writes. "Yet I would hate it if anyone wore it near me today."

That, it turns out, is relatively mild, as their criticisms go. Consider 212, from Carolina Herrera: "Like getting lemon juice in a paper cut." Amarige, from Givenchy? "If you are reading this because it is your darling fragrance, please wear it at home exclusively, and tape the windows shut." Heiress? "Hilariously vile 50/50 mix of cheap shampoo and canned peaches." Princess? "Stupid name, pink perfume, heart shaped bottle, little crown on top. I half expected it to be really great just to spite me. But no, it's probably the most repulsively cloying thing on the market today." Hugo, the men's cologne from Hugo Boss? "Dull but competent lavender-oakmoss thing, suggestive of a day filled with strategy meetings." Love in White? "A chemical white floral so disastrously vile words nearly desert me. If this were a shampoo offered with your first shower after sleeping rough for two months in Nouakchott, you'd opt to keep the lice." Lanvin's Rumeur gets a one-word review: "Baseless."

This is fun to read—and a rare pleasure, too, since the importance of perfume advertising means that one doesn't often get to read strong criticism of multimillion-dollar-earning fragrances. The joy of Turin and Sanchez's book, however, is their ability to write about smell in a way that manages to combine the science of the subject with the vocabulary of scent in witty, vivid descriptions of what these smells are like. Their work is, quite simply, ravishingly entertaining, and it passes the high test that their praise is even more compelling than their criticism. Here, in full, is Turin's review of Lancôme's Trésor:

> I once sat in the London Tube across a young woman wearing a t-shirt printed with headline-size words ALL THIS across her large breasts, and in small type underneath "and brains too." That vulgar-but-wily combination seems to me to sum up Trésor. Up close, when you can read the small print, Trésor is a superbly clever accord between powdery rose and vetiver, reminiscent of the structure of Habanita. From a distance, it's the trashiest, most good-humored pink mohair sweater and bleached hair thing imaginable. When you manage to appeal to both the reptilian brain and the neocortex of menfolk, what happens is what befell Trésor: a huge success.

You don't have to like perfume to like "Perfumes: The Guide." Its blend of technical knowledge and evocative writing is exemplary in the strict sense: people who write about smell and taste in any context should use it as an example. Turin may be wrong about what appeals to the male neocortex, however. As Sanchez says, "The question that women casually shopping for perfume ask more than any other is this: 'What scent drives men wild?' After years of intense research, we know the definitive answer. It is bacon." ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

Blood Kin, *by Ceridwen Dovey (Viking; $23.95).* In this elegantly structured début novel, the deposed president of an unnamed country is imprisoned in his residence with, among others, his chef, his barber, and his portraitist. These three servants, awaiting their fate, reveal, in alternating chapters, their ties to the president and their reasons for serving his corrupt regime. Dovey connects her main characters to the president first through their work—their tasks of feeding, grooming, and painting give them an uneasy intimacy with the president—and then through various women in their lives. The narratives of these women, halfway through the book, expose the full extent of the president's depravity. In lively, straightforward prose, Dovey gets to the heart of the complicit nature of the master-servant relationship, in which "power and desire couple effortlessly."

The Match, *by Romesh Gunesekera (The New Press; $24.95).* Beginning and ending with cricket matches, Gunesekera's fourth novel might seem to bear the hallmarks of familiar post-colonial fare, but its preoccupations are revelatory and unique. Sunny Fernando, uprooted from Colombo as a child by his father's hope for a freer life, spends his adolescence in Manila before settling in London, where, far from friends and family, he struggles to achieve a sense of belonging. Sunny's memories assume such a potent reality that the world around him—slowed and hastened, respectively, by drink and by a family of his own—sometimes seems to him a kind of solipsistic dream. His efforts to reëngage with his life are especially moving because they are presented as ordinary. Sunny's search is not for cultural identity so much as for a basic understanding of what it means to connect.

Wallace Stegner and the American West, *by Philip L. Fradkin (Knopf; $27.50).* Stegner, born in Iowa in 1909 and brought up on a Saskatchewan dirt farm, may have been our last frontier writer. As Fradkin notes in this astute biography, it was a miracle that he didn't write pulp Westerns. Instead, Stegner took as his subject the failure of his father's homestead, built on denial of the most fundamental Western reality: drought. Stegner's fiction stalked the slow disintegration of the family as closely as previous potboilers tracked cattle; and he transformed his father's subsequent rambles—bootlegging the family from the dry northern plains to drier Mormon counties—into a founding narrative stronger than any ultra-violent "revisionist" Western. Whether as novelist, conservationist, or teacher, Stegner showed how the West has "a way of warping well-carpentered habits, and raising the grain on exposed dreams."

The Race Card, *by Richard Thompson Ford (Farrar, Straus & Giroux; $26).* Ford, a professor of law at Stanford, argues that ubiquitous accusations of discrimination in the United States frequently distract from serious racial injustices, which, in the ambivalent aftermath of the civil-rights era, "stem from isolation, poverty, and lack of socialization as much as from intentional discrimination or racism." Drawing on examples from popular culture and the law, Ford guides the reader through the worst of these abuses, and articulates a bold strategy for dealing with systematic injustice in a world of "racism without racists." Ford's pragmatic approach will irk those for whom ideological concerns are uppermost, but few would object to his emphasis on the need for long-term solutions to persistent segregation and poverty or to his call for discussion of "the more ambiguous cases of bias in the cool tone of technical expertise rather than in the heated cadence of moral judgment."

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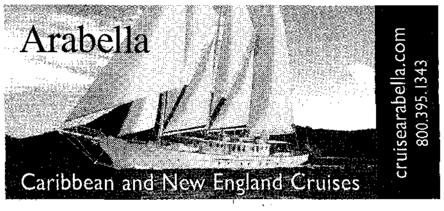

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THE CURRENT CINEMA

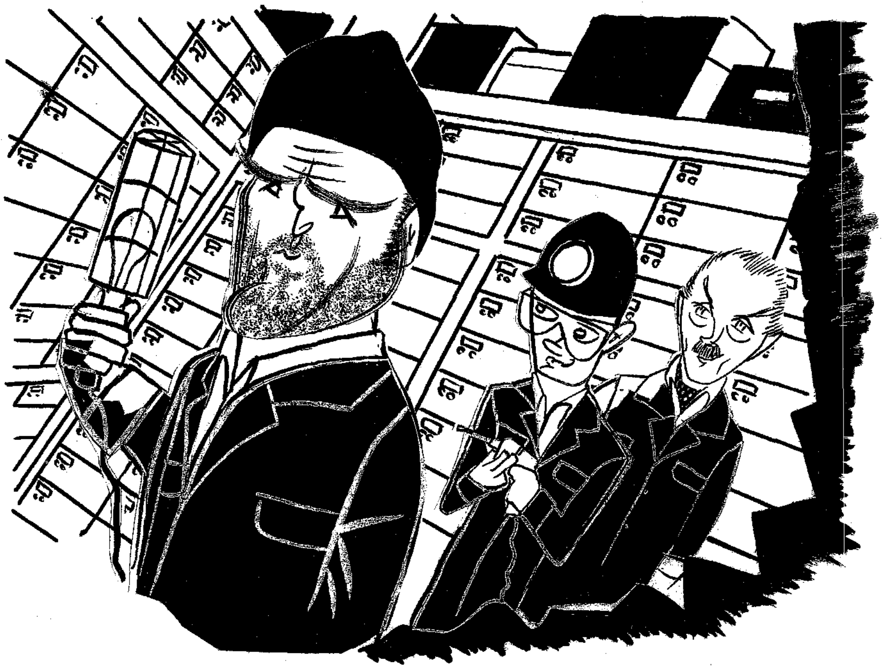
CLASS ACTS

"The Bank Job" and "The Duchess of Langeais."

BY DAVID DENBY

In September, 1971, a group of stumblebum thieves tunnelled their way into a branch of the Lloyds Bank in the Marylebone section of London and cleaned out the vault. While the robbery was in progress, a ham-radio operator, randomly spinning the dial, overheard walkie-talkie conversations between the gang and a lookout posted on a nearby roof. Paradoxically, the "walkie-talkie robbery" became famous, in part, because press coverage of it disappeared four days after the break-in was discovered (it took place on a weekend). The reason for the silence was widely assumed to be that journalists had been told by the government that national security was at stake. Those are the curious real-world events behind "The Bank Job," an enjoyable new British heist movie that falls into the genial line of "The Lavender Hill Mob," "The Day They Robbed the Bank of England," and other such easygoing Anglo entertainments about the pleasures of theft. "The Bank Job" has its familiar scenes—sturdy fellows digging underground to get to the vault, the excitement of closing in on an enormous treasure, a smashing girl who's connected to the caper, and so on. But, despite these generic building blocks, the actual robbery that the picture is based on is shrouded in mystery, and the screenwriters, Dick Clement and Ian La Fresnais, have engaged in a fair amount of entertaining invention.

"The Bank Job" begins with a glimpse of England's best-known party girl of the time, Princess Margaret, misbehaving on some unnamed Caribbean island. Lurking outside a window, a young man with a camera snaps the royal personage in bed with two men. The photographs then fall into the hands of Michael X, a real-life tough who, in the late nineteen-fifties, had moved from Trinidad to London, where he set himself up as a pimp, drug dealer, and extortionist. By 1971, Michael X had spent several years as a spokesman for black power, a fiery ideologue who titillated parts of the city's intelligentsia (including some upper-class women). In the movie, he stores the photographs of Margaret in a safe-deposit box and uses them to protect himself from prosecution—an outrageous ploy that causes Britain's internal Secret Service to spring into action. The smart boys of MI5 undertake a highly dubious scheme: they dispatch a beautiful ex-model (Saffron Burrows) to persuade some low-rent London friends from her past to break into the bank and to take her along, so that she can quietly nab the Margaret indecencies and return them to the protection of the Crown. The men, at first, think that they're after nothing but jewels and cash. They're ignorant not only of the photographs but also of the other items the filmmakers rather implausibly say are stored in the vault, including a ledger detailing payoffs to the police and photographs of swells at play in the city's poshest brothel.



Jason Statham (left) heads a gang of thieves in a new British heist movie.

TOM BACHTELL

How much of this is true? It's impossible to say. The filmmakers admit that they made up the model, but the Caribbean island is presumably Mustique, where Margaret spent a good deal of time playing. Several of the actual thieves were arrested, but it's unknown how much hard time they served, and most of the swag (at least five hundred thousand pounds) was never recovered. Many of the alleged principal players are dead, so the filmmakers have jauntily mixed together fact, fiction, and what sounds like the party gossip of many decades. They draw on the tabloid traditions of ruling-class kinkiness and hypocrisy. They even introduce, in a kind of special guest appearance, a representative of the Crown: no less than Lord Mountbatten. The scathing portrait of Michael X (Peter de Jersey) feels as if it had been shaped by V. S. Naipaul's contempt for him in the novel "Guerrillas" (1975) and the essay "Michael X and the Black Power Killings in Trinidad" (1979). The picture is a potpourri: American viewers can enjoy it as a crime film with many twists and turns; the British can merrily decode the references to well-known figures and scandals of long ago.

Given the nature of the material, which comes to a climax with half of London's criminal and Secret Service personnel chasing the baffled thieves, you would expect the movie to be played as farce, or perhaps as a satire on the manners of the upper class. That's the way Richard Lester or the Boulting brothers would once have told such a story. But Roger Donaldson, the Australian-born director who, in recent years, has become the kind of solid pro that Hollywood developed in the nineteen-thirties and forties, has made a straightforward, tight-knit crime thriller, which incidentally features some very odd plot elements. Respecting the rules of the game, Donaldson assembles the robbery team (guys who work at a car dealership and other minor jobs) and gives us a brief account of their everyday lives; he lays out their loyalties to one another and to the upwardly bound model, with whom two of them had affairs many years earlier. The plot, which includes such intriguing minor characters as the porn king of Soho (played suavely by David Suchet, of "Poirot" fame), is terrifically complicated, so Donaldson moves things along briskly and refuses to dwell on violence (as an American movie would).

The director has done his best to restore the civilized pleasures of the genre. There are a couple of mild movie jokes: the filmmakers cast the tall, darkly handsome Richard Lintern, who looks as if he had just missed out replacing Sean Connery as James Bond, as the chief MI5 agent. And Donaldson has got a star in the making: Jason Statham, as Terry Leather, the head of the robbery gang. Statham, who has been playing tough-guy roles with authority in the "Transporter" films, has clipped hair, burning eyes, and a voice that sounds like acid running over gravel. He leads a group of mugs to the pinnacle of crime. There's an irony implicit in the material that may even be true and that Donaldson should have made more of: whatever happened in 1971, it does seem that the working-class guys saved the honor (temporarily, at least) of the men and women at the top of the heap.

The man—stalwart, imposing, and impassioned—pursues, and the woman—intellectual yet worldly and flirtatious—resists. And then they change places: she pursues, and he withdraws. In Jacques Rivette's remarkable "The Duchess of Langeais," romantic devotion becomes a perverse kind of warfare, in which a lover who admits that he's in love loses the campaign. The movie was adapted by Pascal Bonitzer and Christine Laurent from a short novel by Balzac. It's set in the eighteen-twenties, during the most reactionary years of the Restoration, when divorce, which was permissible during Napoleon's reign, was banned again, and the Catholic Church reasserted its power. In such an atmosphere, strength of will becomes everything. One must not give way to passion—it is the province of poets and of fools who abandon themselves to vagabond status, forgoing command of the drawing room and the aristocratic ball. The Duchess of Langeais (Jeanne Balibar) has some sort of husband; he's nowhere in sight, but she's not free to leave him or to carry on an affair with General Armand de Montriveau (Guillaume Depardieu), a gloomy but arresting hero from the Napoleonic years, who adores her. Montriveau has a bum leg that causes him to propel himself into rooms like a projectile. He's stiff yet explosive—too roiled internally to make a graceful and patient lover. In the person of Guillaume Depardieu (Gerard's son), he's a humorless but romantically appealing figure. Jeanne Balibar has a pale, long, almost equine face with luminous dark eyes, and a voice that wanders caressingly over her lines. Lounging on a divan with her breasts partially exposed, she looks like a Delacroix subject. The Duchess is enragingly elusive and possibly mad; the General is very direct and also possibly mad.

Rivette, a New Wave original from a half century ago, has brought off this period movie in an atmosphere of unrivalled stillness. The calm and orderly beauty, the exquisite rooms (formal yet lived-in) exert a hushed fascination. The film begins in Majorca, where the Duchess has taken refuge in a Carmelite nunnery; Montriveau finds her there after a long search. Rivette then jumps back to their time together in Paris, which makes up the main body of the film. The couple's slow approach to what could be an adulterous affair moves forward at the highest level of literacy: each pauses before speaking and then utters a perfectly formed sentence. This syntactical duelling is attended by mute servants who carry candles from room to room. (The movie makes us aware of the erotic power of both light and darkness.) A Freudian reading of the movie would insist that the Duchess is terrified of sexuality and uses God and society to keep the General out of her bed, while insisting that he pay court to her in public. Yet she's hardly a hypocrite: the religious feeling and the social constraints are palpable, and so is the irrational power of will deep within both of them. As much as a man and woman in an American film noir, these two are heading for trouble. ♦

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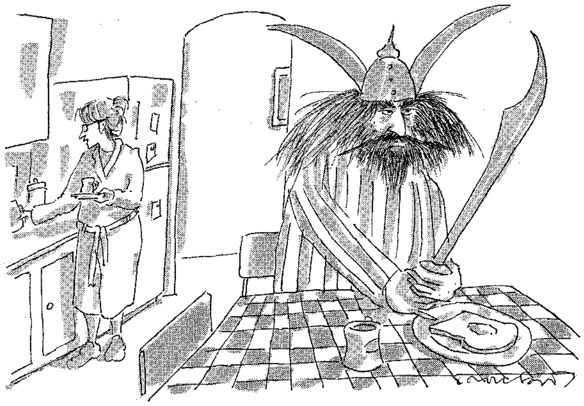
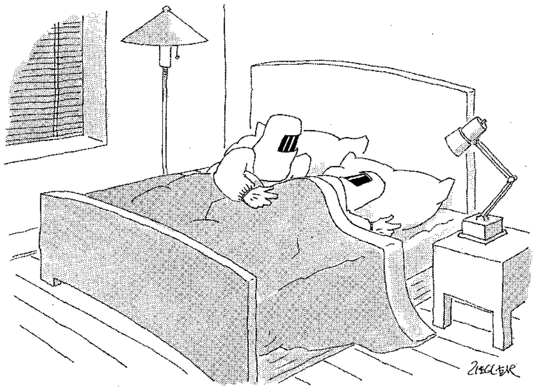
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Drew Dernavich, must be received by Sunday, March 9th. Finalists in the February 25th contest appear below; go online to vote. We will announce the winner, along with the finalists in this week's contest, in the March 24th issue. The winner will be given a signed print of the cartoon. Any U.S. resident age eighteen or over can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit www.newyorker.com/captioncontest.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"We're all out of the blood of your enemies. You'll have to settle for marmalade."
Jason Beck, Los Angeles, Calif.



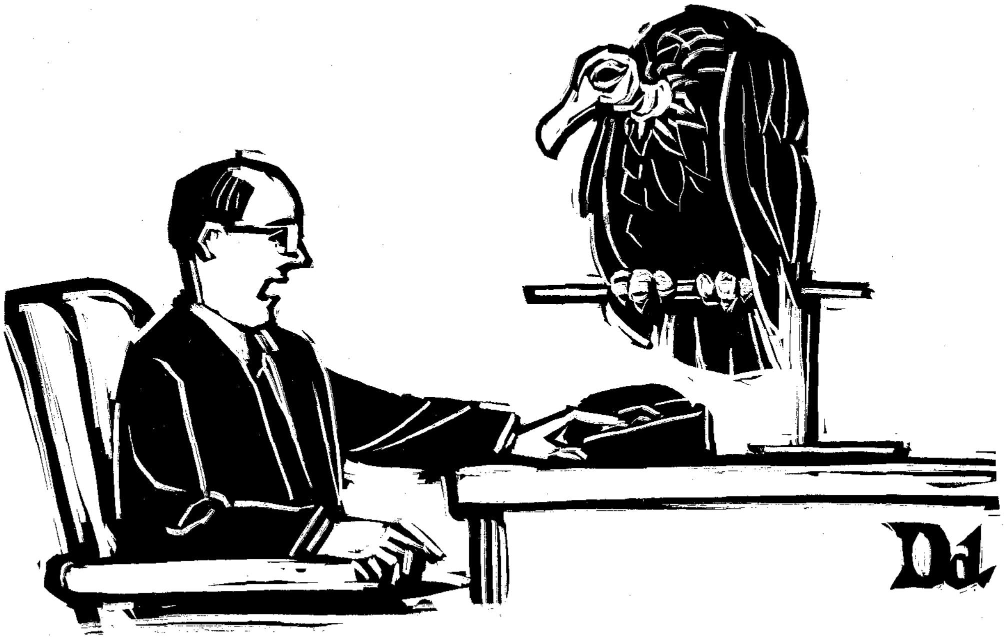
THE FINALISTS

"Don't sexual fantasies usually involve sex at some point?"
Alex Goulder, Boulder, Colo.

"Next time can we just get flu shots like everyone else?"
Matthew May, Westlake Village, Calif.

"Not tonight, dear. I have acute radiation poisoning."
Stephen Schwartz, Wilmette, Ill.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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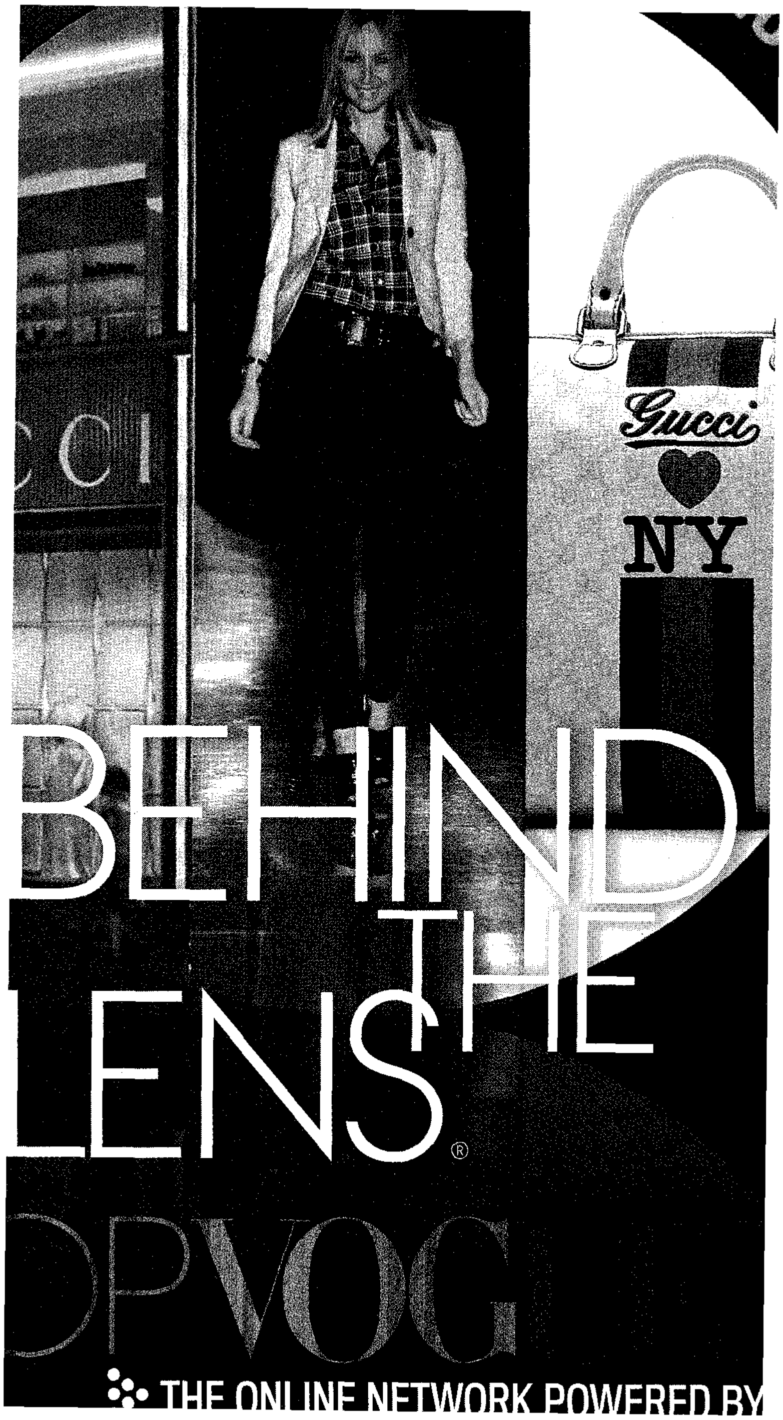
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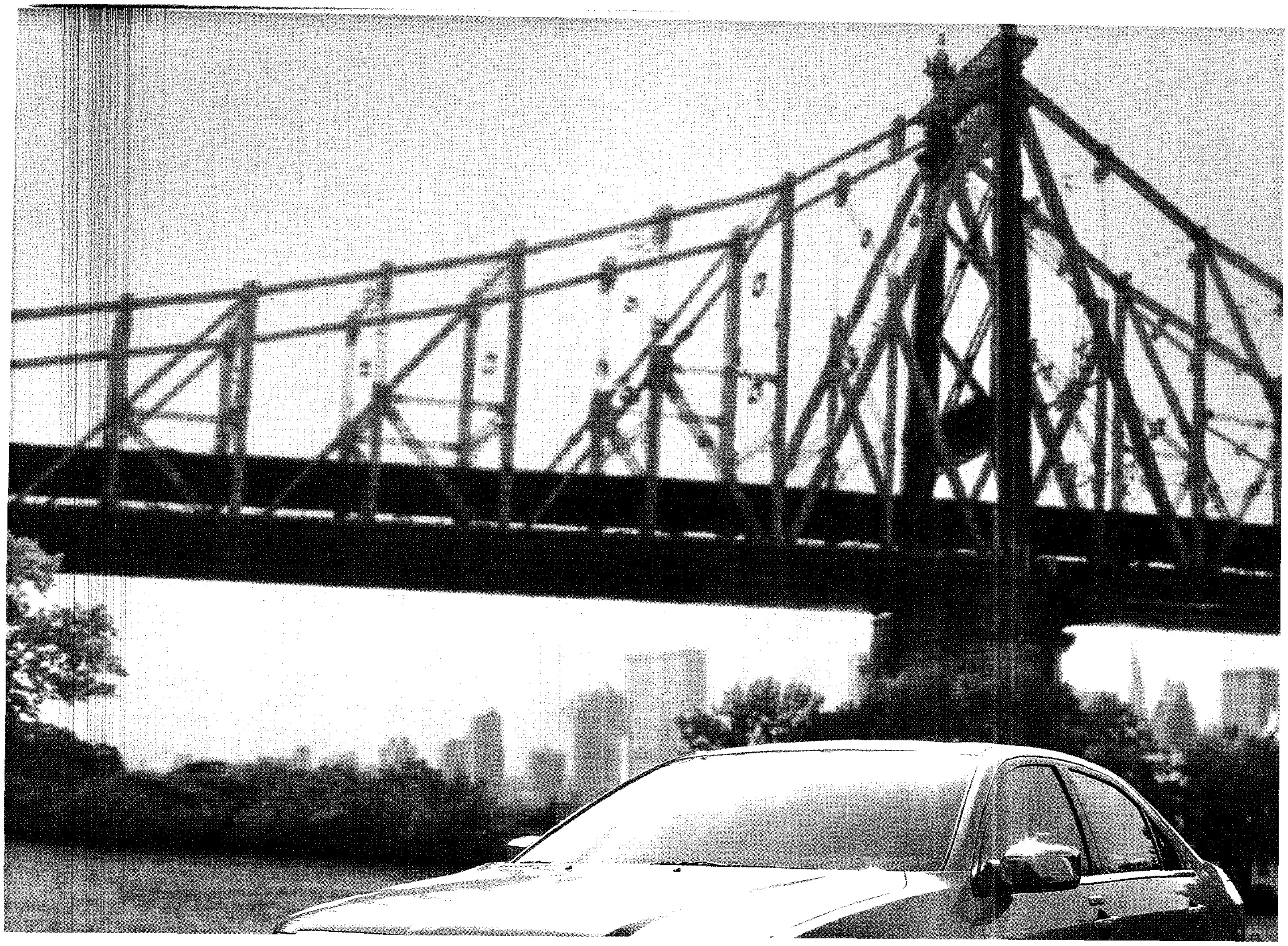

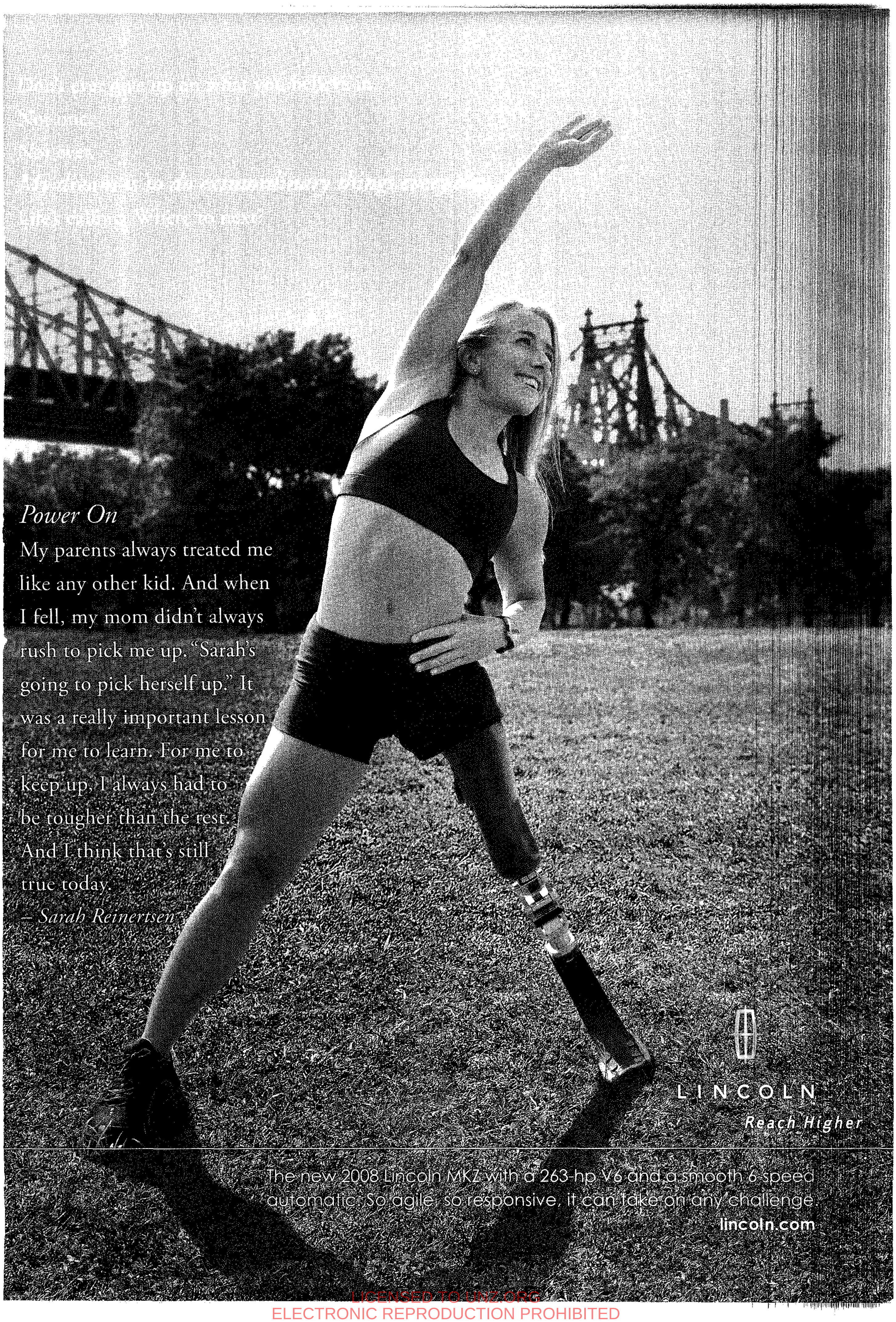

Power On

My parents always treated me like any other kid. And when I fell, my mom didn't always rush to pick me up. "Sarah's going to pick herself up." It was a really important lesson for me to learn. For me to keep up, I always had to be tougher than the rest. And I think that's still true today.

– Sarah Reinertsen

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